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SUPER MARIO MAKER ■ TRACKMANIA TURBO ■ STAR FOX ZERO ■ DIRTY BOMB
ROCKET LEAGUE ■ THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TRI FORCE HEROES ■ HER STORY

Lara Croft gets a lot of scrutiny, but then she *is* the most recognisable lead female character in gaming. As such, all of the questions and concerns about how women are depicted in games get directed at her first and foremost. Is she being objectified, is she being cast as the victim, is she self-actualised? All I know is that I find the rebooted Lara and the journey Crystal Dynamics is plotting for her far more compelling than those that came before.

I think there are pluses and minuses for both versions of the character. I don't think anyone would deny that Lara of old was a little over the top in her physical appearance for instance, but she had a no nonsense approach to adventuring, was unafraid, and dived head-first into combat. New Lara feels a little more realistically proportioned (although still not always appropriately dressed for the locations she ends up in), but her story begins with trauma and victimhood, which isn't something you usually see straight away with male leads.

Suffering, pain, heartache and peril play their part in helping to establish any character as vulnerable and therefore more relatable, but it's a question of when in their tale you place that content. Include it in the origin and it can seem as if it took them becoming a victim to awaken their strength. Place it midway through their story, however, and it's simply a trial that their strength can overcome. It may seem like a subtle difference to some, but it's pretty big when you're telling a story about gaming's most iconic female hero.

So *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* is Crystal Dynamics' chance to set the record straight. What kind of Lara is it really creating? Is she just the product of an ordeal or was she really always something more?



Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR


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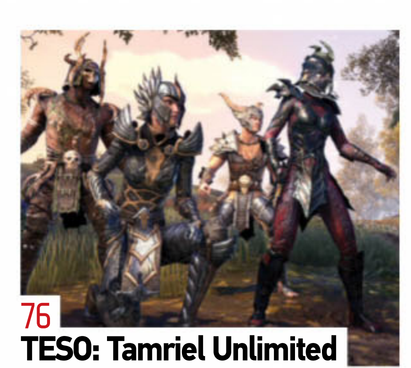
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RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER

Crystal Dynamics opens up on the biggest exclusive of 2015

(DOWNLOADABLE CONTENTMENT)

The Future Of DLC

→ Downloadable content has been around long enough now that we've seen the good, the bad, and the ugly… but how is the distribution and execution of DLC going to change as the industry evolves?

It's an argument that will never go away: the value of DLC. As we move foot by tentative foot into this brave new world of digital-focused content, DLC is becoming more and more a part of what a game *is*, how it's kept alive and how it's presented to consumers. Like all fledgling practices, there are companies that are doing it right (CD Projekt Red) and there are companies that don't do so well (looking at you, Bungie).

Take *Destiny*'s upcoming expansion – *The Taken King* releases 15 September, and will mark the one-year anniversary of Bungie/



Activision's acclaimed shooter. Thing is, the DLC itself costs as much as the vanilla game, and requires you own that *as well* before you can even play it. Worse yet, for players in Europe, we've been hit by a 1:1 exchange rate; where the US pays $40 (roughly £28) for the add-on, we have to pay £40. That, understandably, has gotten people's backs up.

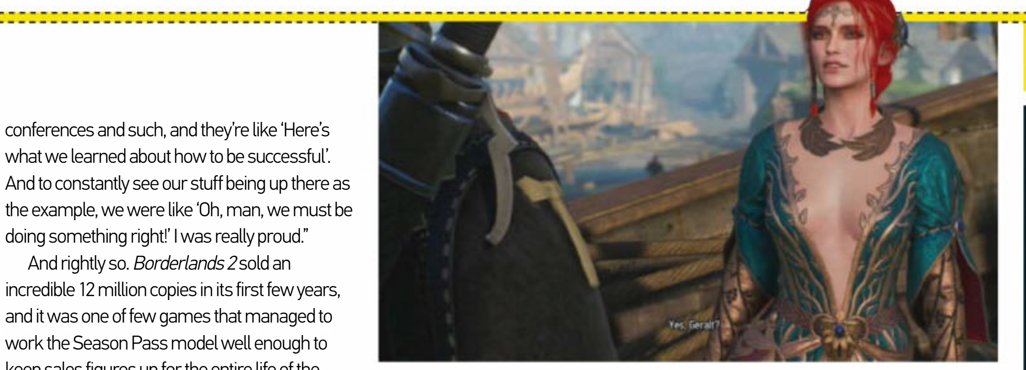
So what's the key to success here? "We did really affect the industry [with *Borderlands*' DLC]" explains Randy Pitchford, creative director at Gearbox Software, "and we became the poster child for how to do DLC for a lot of the triple-A games. It was so fun to see when the first parties were doing their slides, like at dev

DATA STREAM → YAGER HAS BEEN DROPPED AS THE DEVELOPER OF DEAD ISLAND 2 BY DEEP SILVER

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Your guide to the essential stories





conferences and such, and they're like 'Here's what we learned about how to be successful'. And to constantly see our stuff being up there as the example, we were like 'Oh, man, we must be doing something right!' I was really proud."

And rightly so. *Borderlands 2* sold an incredible 12 million copies in its first few years, and it was one of few games that managed to work the Season Pass model well enough to keep sales figures up for the entire life of the DLC campaign. This was a trail-blazing way of offering DLC, but how did it happen?

"So we had all that experience from *Borderlands 1*, and by the time we got to *Borderlands 2* going into cert and we were planning that DLC, we kind of knew more about what people wanted," explains Pitchford. "Our publisher [2K] kind of ordered… They looked at

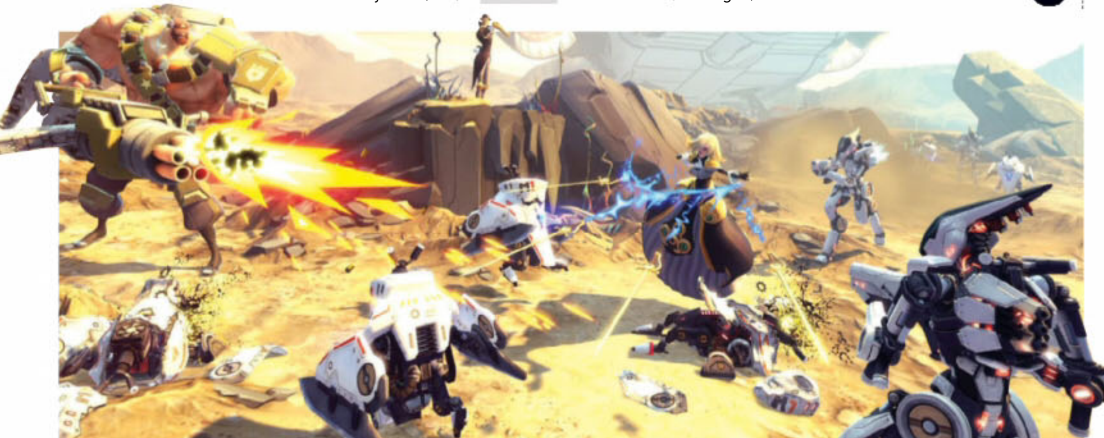
> "Hopefully we'd make at least as much [on the DLC packs] as we'd spent on them, but we didn't know"
>
> Randy Pitchford, Borderlands director

the *Borderlands 1* DLC sales and they said 'Give me a season pass and make four campaigns'. So we just took the risk. We were making money, we already were so far ahead with what the main game did that even if any of those risks sold zero, we were going to be okay. Hopefully we'd make at least as much money as we'd spent on them, but we didn't know."

So it's down to Pitchford and Gearbox's willingness to take creative risks that *Borderlands*' DLC did so well? We wondered – is that mimicked elsewhere in the industry? Well, the fact that *The Witcher III* developers can plan out 16 free packs of downloadable content *and give them to players for free* speaks volumes when it comes to this tactic: if some of the packs are lacklustre or don't quite hit the mark, it doesn't matter, because no-one's paid for them. There are still two buyable story additions on the way (and pretty sizeable from what we understand), and CD Projekt Red's mentality seems to be that if it impresses with the 16 free packs enough, more people will want these mini-campaigns.

But what comes next? We've seen good pricing structures affect sales positively, and we've seen free content affect the overall attitude towards DLC positively, so where is there to go now? "It's kind of hard to explain exactly what it is, but I feel like we're at the same spot that we were at with *Borderlands* before launch," explains Pitchford, talking about Gearbox's newest effort, *Battleborn*. "We're screaming from the highest mountain, saying we think you're going to like this, but people are like 'We'll believe it when we see it…' I mean, there's pre-orders, but even in the best case scenario, pre-orders are like ten per cent of what you actually do. […] I have big ambitions [for the DLC]. I want the game to live on. What specifically we'll do, though," he laughs, "I have no idea."

Above Most people hate alternate costumes as DLC, but when they're offered for free, what is there to complain about?



Below We look forward to seeing if Pitchford can make lightning strike twice with *Battleborn* and its as-yet-unconfirmed DLC structure.

Reader Reaction

What's your preferred type of DLC?

- New characters
- Skins/clothing/hair styles
- Bonus modes
- Story expansions

For a great example of DLC done well I give you *Artorias Of The Abyss*, expanded on *Dark Souls* beautifully. For a poor example, any game that charges for costume packs.
Karl Renar

I hate add-ons like weapons, armour, characters etc. I don't think they really add anything to a game, certainly not substantial enough to charge for it! If you want to add these, then make them free. They always feel like they were meant to be included with the original content but then got left out to make a bit of extra money. I don't mind paying for extra missions or story content, anything that extends the life of a game.
Lankysi

I believe that DLC has become a fundamental part of the modern gaming business model, so whether or not we like it it's going to continue. I'm not a huge fan of it. Alternatively, I don't mind paying more-for-more, so long as the content provided is substantial and worth the money. Where I disagree with DLC is charging money for superfluous or limited content, or content that's locked in-game from release. It smacks of corporate cynicism and only serves to undermine confidence in the DLC system.
Noel Atcheson

DLC is a great idea to keep a game that you love going longer, but too many times the content and length of the DLC is questionable.
Phil Hall



JADE RAYMOND HAS JOINED EA TO LEAD NEW MOTIVE STUDIO AND VISCERAL STAR WARS PROJECT

(THE KEY TO THE WORLD)

How Rebuilding The Entire Game Kept Kingdom Hearts Alive

Despite creating the series, Tetsuya Nomura was reluctant to return to Kingdom Hearts, but he came to use the tensions at Square Enix as creative inspiration. We spoke to him about how the game is progressing…

Disney is very franchise-oriented – we'll never see the "final" Mickey Mouse story – is there a pressure to keep *Kingdom Hearts* going forever?
The discussion of the end of *Kingdom Hearts* has never come up between me and Disney, so I don't know what their intentions are. But while creating *Kingdom Hearts*, with each generation I think to myself "This should be something that can't be accomplished by just Disney". It has to be something uniquely *Kingdom Hearts*. So it's a matter of how long can I keep creating for *Kingdom Hearts*! I don't know if the fans would enjoy it as much if it was just Disney, if it wasn't a combination of Disney and my own creativity.

Has there been anything that Disney has stopped you from doing?
I don't feel they inhibited anything. The Disney worlds that appear within our game are their franchise so they're interested in maintaining those worlds. But anything unique to *Kingdom Hearts* hasn't been a source of disagreement from Disney. Of course, sometimes when we're writing the story then sometimes they ask us to give it a lighter tone or happier ending – but they haven't stopped us from doing anything.

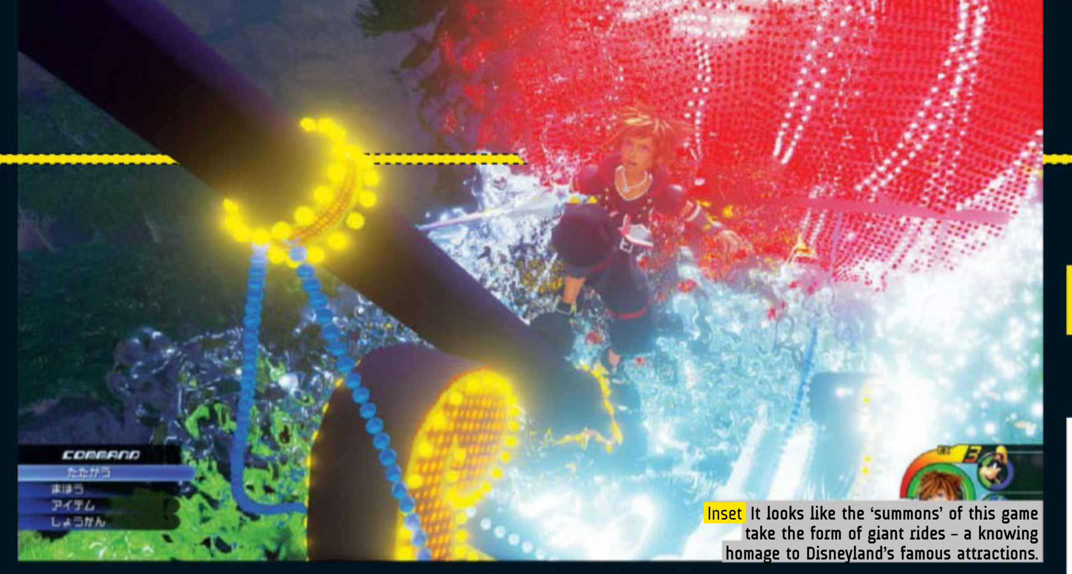
What has skipping the PS3 era allowed you to do with this new iteration of the *Kingdom Hearts* systems?
There wasn't a specific intention to skip a generation other than *Kingdom Hearts* being on a console has a very high bar to reach. Fans who love the series would want something even greater than *Kingdom Hearts II*. Unfortunately, during that period I didn't get the chance to start on a project that big and other key developers were working on other projects. We needed to get our experience


Above Tetsuya Nomura is also in charge of *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, currently in development.

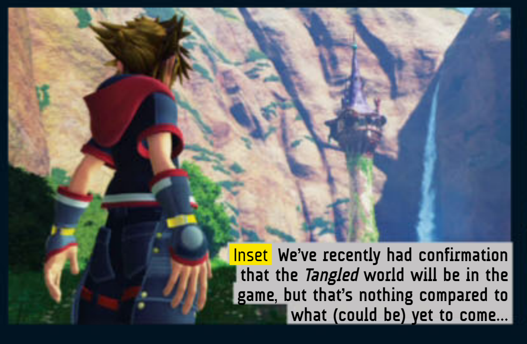
and polish our skills at creating *Kingdom Hearts* games so that there was a proper preparation for a big title like *Kingdom Hearts III*. It just happened that this preparation took the life cycle of the PS3.

Since you switched engines during development, what was that transition like? Did it take the team a long time to adapt to that new engine or was it relatively smooth?
The transition was quite a process. We pretty much had to start from the ground again. We had to make sure that we could recreate our key effects in the Unreal Engine and that the effects we specifically needed for *Kingdom Hearts* could be adapted. We were also developing a *Kingdom Hearts*-specific shader and we had to make a lot of adjustments so we could use that shader on the new engine. That goes a long way to explaining the long


ROB MCELHENNEY, CREATOR OF IT'S ALWAYS SUNNY IN PHILADELPHIA, WILL DIRECT THE MINECRAFT MOVIE



Inset It looks like the 'summons' of this game take the form of giant rides – a knowing homage to Disneyland's famous attractions.



Inset We've recently had confirmation that the *Tangled* world will be in the game, but that's nothing compared to what (could be) yet to come…



WHEN TWO WORLDS COLLIDE

→ A strange and challenging clash of cultures

■ *Kingdom Hearts* isn't the most accessible franchise to get into – set over many Square Enix and Disney worlds, the characters are varied and the story threads plentiful. The initial pitch to Square Enix bosses was apparently met with scepticism. "When I first brought up the concept internally, even then people were very sceptical," Nomura reveals to us, "and when we made the announcement people were unsure – but at the same time I didn't understand why they didn't get this was a really good game. It's very difficult to distinguish what game is going to be good in the end, that's my impression."

> "The transition was quite a process. We pretty much had to start from the ground again"
>
> Tetsuya Nomura, Square Enix

distance between the announcement and now, when we're able to reveal more information about the title.

Are new battle systems based on modifications you wanted for the previous games but couldn't achieve on the previous hardware?
I feel that going through the different spin-off titles and ideas for battle systems, how the gameplay there works, we kind of learned from that and implemented a new battle system as well as introducing new and unique moves. There's also the Keyblade Transformation which is involved around the plot point where Sora has gone through a test of mastery so it makes sense story-wise that this transformation is part of his combat. There have been many bold additions to *Kingdom Hearts III* in combat and those are only possible because we have access to the better hardware but it hasn't necessarily been things I couldn't have done then. It's more that I learned from the experiments of the spin-offs.

In the first game there was one playable character, in the second there were two – will there be three in the third?
It's a secret but by saying that we imply that maybe something's going on. We can't disclose anything but, maybe, something will happen there.



Inset *Kingdom Hearts III* is introducing a lot of new features to the series, most importantly a new combat system.

→ BETHESDA'S FREE GAME FALLOUT SHELTER MANAGED TO EARN $5.1 MILLION IN ITS FIRST TWO WEEKS ON SALE





"There was no better spokesman for the 'fun first' policy than Iwata, and he will be sorely missed"

On Iwata's tragic passing and the future of Nintendo

As editor of a PlayStation magazine, you might assume that I couldn't give two Moves what goes on in the House Of Mario. But you couldn't be more wrong. For as long as I can remember, I've owned and enjoyed every major platform and been filled with joy thanks to developers from all around the globe. I'm not trying to make this about me here, rather offer a little context – even someone such as myself, whose very livelihood revolves around celebrating all things Sony, can easily appreciate and respect the impact a person like Satoru Iwata had on the global games industry, and be moved to tears by news of his passing. In a field that seems to be shifting more towards business than art as development costs spiral, there was no better spokesman for the 'fun first' policy than Iwata, and he will be sorely missed.

Iwata was the ideal figurehead for Nintendo, representing the firm's core principles perfectly. Having assumed the role at a time when GameCube was struggling to compete with its Microsoft and Sony rivals, he was pivotal in changing the company's battle plan and ensuring its survival through the introduction of the touch-based DS, and removing entry barriers with Wii's gesture-heavy control system. Despite being technologically dwarfed by competitors, both platforms dominated – Iwata's philosophy that gaming should be for everyone paid off. And even in light of Wii U's failure to offer the power of the console and tablet markets it attempted to merge, Nintendo's dedication to gaming has delivered some of the true greats of this generation. A world without *Smash*, *MK8* or *Bayonetta 2* is one I'd rather not consider.

And while it was Iwata himself who delivered the news that Nintendo would move into the lucrative mobile market, the statement was delivered with the caveat that it wouldn't follow the same cash-grab model that fuels so many studios. Without Iwata, however, and with most of his like-minded, high-profile peers unlikely to take the helm prior to retirement, this strategy may change. The Nintendo name alone is enough to sell games – and in the shadow of mobile titans like *Puzzle And Dragons*, *Angry Birds* and even *Minecraft*, you have to worry that the decision to sell out might be not only a dangerously easy one to make but also perhaps even the right one from a commercial standpoint.

Replacing Iwata will be incredibly difficult – impossible, even. I couldn't name an external hire who would mesh well with the ethos already in place (and likely cemented in Nintendo's plans for whatever NX turns out to be) while his obvious successors already on the books don't feel like they'd bring the same personal touch. Hell, even if Nintendo had every videogames professional in the industry on speed dial, those boots would *still* be too big to fill. Leave a legacy that can even make a professional PlayStation fanboy cry and you can be pretty sure that you were doing something right…

RIP Satoru Iwata, 1959-2015



Luke Albigés is Editor of **Play** magazine and will be playing a hell of a lot of Smash in honour of a true industry legend

Import Watch

→ Rhythm Tengoku: The Best+

If you own a Japanese 3DS and haven't yet downloaded this, you're doing importing wrong. The simple rhythm action series is more or less best in class for traditional beat-matching gameplay and the character and variety seen in the mini-games is second to none. A western release is looking less likely with every passing day, so this may even be your only way to enjoy this greatest hits collection of the franchise's finest moments.





SPLATOON HAS BECOME NINTENDO'S LATEST 1 MILLION SELLING GAME AS WII U SALES HIT THE 10 MILLION MARK


ROCCAT
SET THE RULES

VOYO TECH

Mattessons
FRIDGE
RAIDERS

GT Omega
RACING

> "Not only is this the largest prize pot in eSports history, but it's also still growing!"

$17,659,704 and counting!

By now we should all have recovered from our post-convention blues, the excitement of what the gaming gods have in store for us in the future has now been replaced with waiting. This lull is only compounded by the fact we are deep in the "summer season", a time of year where gamers across the globe are forced to confront the great outdoors.

Traditionally this would also mean that the off season would be upon us in the eSports industry as all the teams and players go recharge their batteries and party (read: 'get real jobs/save up money'), but not this year. Especially not for anyone who plays *Dota 2*, as by the time you read this, 16 of the best *Dota 2* teams from around the world will be congregating in Seattle to take part in the biggest *Dota 2* tournament of all time: The International, with a current prize pot of $17,659,704.

Not only is this the largest prize pot in eSports history, larger than most mainstream sports (almost double the size of the US Open total prize purse), it's also still growing! As it stands first place will get an incredible $6.1 million; heck, finishing fourth earns $1.5 million. These numbers are even more incredible when you consider that the initial prize pool was only $1.6 million. I can't believe I just said "only" $1.6 million.

So how did we get to such crazy numbers? Well, Valve, the company behind *Dota 2*, has been paying attention to the recent surge in popularity of crowd-funding. The company has created a *Compendium* that fans of *Dota 2* could buy. When you bought the *Compendium*, 25 per cent of your purchase went to the prize pot and the rest to Valve. When certain prize thresholds were passed, fans who bought the *Compendium* got items such as special in-game animations or music. So for the first time in eSports history, prize pots have become self-funding.

But we shouldn't just focus on the prizes. A total of $15.5 million was raised through the *Compendium*. Now if this $15.5 million is only 25 per cent of the compendium price, that means that Valve gets to take in $46.5 million, and that's certainly going to increase. Valve deserves a lot of credit for not only delivering the largest prize pot in eSports history, but also making it profitable for the company. Plus, it's managed to bring a lot of excitement to what would normally be the off-season, keeping pro gaming relevant all year round.



Paul Kent has over 16 years experience in the eSports industry and is currently eSports Director at the UK's leading eSports company Gfinity



The 2014 International *Dota 2* championships sold 10,000 tickets within an hour and was watched by 20 million unique viewers, according to Valve.

Image by: Jakob Wells

→ ANDROID CONSOLE OUYA HAS BEEN BOUGHT OUT BY RAZER, WITH STAFF MOVING TO THE HARDWARE FIRM



“You are affected by the world, and you can affect the world in turn”

EMIL KRAFTLING, SENIOR GAME DESIGNER, AVALANCHE STUDIOS



WHY I ♥...

AGE OF WONDERS

EMIL KRAFTLING, SENIOR GAME DESIGNER, AVALANCHE STUDIOS

“*I love how the* [Age Of Wonders] *games really build an emergent world of rules and systems… you are affected by the world, and you can affect the world in turn. We have a studio credo here at Avalanche, and that is ‘If you see it, you can go there; if you poke it, it reacts.’ That’s the baseline for how we build sandboxes. The Age Of Wonders games really resonate with that, I myself have taken inspiration from that, and really tried to build on the systems that those games set out, all those years ago.*”

"Mad Max is about fantasy, about the frontier. The unknown, the lone wanderer that you see coming back again in westerns and in fantasy. It's themes of exploration"

EMIL KRAFTLING SENIOR GAME DESIGNER, AVALANCHE STUDIOS



Max might not look like Mel Gibson or Tom Hardy, but he's the same old character you know from all four films so far.





Mad Max

CONCEPT ■ Max was just trying to get some alone time when War Boys came and took his weapons, his car, his fuel. And that… well, that made him *mad*

The sandiest sandbox we've ever seen

There was supposed to be a new *Mad Max* film back in 1998. Thing is, movies – like games – can fall into development hell easier than they'd like, and *Mad Max: Fury Road* did just that, taking the whispers of a new *Mad Max* game with it. George Miller (the mastermind behind the entire series) himself stated that he wanted a new *Mad Max* game in 2008, too, tied into this theoretical animated movie that (surprise, surprise) never saw the light of day. For the gamers that wanted some dusty, hot, vehicular action, they'd just have to go back to the NES game from 1990. So this *Mad Max* – the *Mad Max* on these pages – was supposed to be a movie tie-in. It was supposed to be the War Boy riding on the back of the film's rig. But somewhere along the line, that changed and frankly – from what we've played – that's the best thing that could have possibly happened to the game.

Let's start from the beginning, then. "I don't even know if there's a single page in a solitary book somewhere that even *outlines* what might have happened," explains Frank Rooke, game director, when we ask him how this apocalyptic wasteland came into being. "It's some apocalyptic event… that lead to a series of events… that lead to the falling apart of the world. You can't say 'there was a plague', or 'there was a nuclear holocaust' or anything. I mean, there might have been, but ultimately that's just one thing amongst many other things [that happened]."

/// That's all he knows about the pre-Waste lore of Max's world; hell, that's all *anyone* knows about the lore of Max's world. Miller keeps the secrets of this dusty universe very close, as we understand it, so close that not even Rooke or Avalanche know more than they need to. We imagine Miller – one of cinema's greatest living minds – is a bit of a nightmare to work under: we imagine everything must be 'just so', everything must conform to his creative vision. But that actually makes for a creative working environment.

"We spent an awful lot of time learning the rulesets of the Wasteland," explains Rooke, "We wanted to make sure we operated within those rules, [Miller's] rules. That was hard; once we started we were often tempted to step outside of them, but if we did that we wouldn't be making an authentic game. We just wouldn't. So we became determined to do things [in Miller's] original vision… now that's a *challenge*. But as a designer – and not just a games designer, but a designer of *anything* – it's much harder to design something when there's no parameters.

"So when you've got parameters, you think 'God it's tough to work under these constraints'. But that's actually what you need to do something creative – you need those boundaries, you need the challenge, you need something to jump off. Having that ruleset, having that vision, having that original George Miller [brief]… all that became *our* challenge. So it's good *and* bad to have those constraints, it's that kind of thing that makes you dig deep and be creative."

/// And credit to the team at Avalanche Studios, they pulled it off. We played a build of the game that was quite far along in development and it had all the elements of open world games we *like*. That is to say – it felt like *Far Cry* in the way its world came together, but played like the *Arkham* games when it came to combat. The map from on-high might be a *Dune*-y wasteland, but is populated with little pockets of life and history – with environmental story beats akin to *Assassin's Creed*.

"It was challenging to try and understand how to turn a desert into something that can be interesting… not just for an hour, but for 100 hours," Rooke explains as he watches us crank up the generator for a hot-air balloon – a vantage point that gave us a pretty spectacular look at the Wastes (and automatically added mission waypoints to our map). "People that only see the game for a little bit, they're like 'it's just sand!' But it's not just sand, it's so much more – we don't just hit you in the face with it, we make it so that the more you play, the more you gradually see.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: Sweden
Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
Developer: Avalanche Studios
Release: 1 September 2015
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded in 2003 by brothers Linus and Viktor Blomberg alongside Christofer Sundberg, Avalanche is a game developer and game engine creator that specialises in making new IP within its own engines. Based across Stockholm and New York, the studio has a unique trans-Atlantic flavour.



Developer History

Just Cause
2006 [PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360]
The Hunter
2009 [PC]
Renegade Ops
2011 [PS3, PC, Xbox 360]
Mad Max
2015 [PS4, Xbox One, PC]

High Point

Just Cause 2 was an anarchist's sandbox – a playground for those who wanted to wreak havoc on everything and anything. Its gorgeous colour palette helped, too.

Slowly, but surely, you'll see pieces of the past – as you explore an area, you'll begin to put the puzzle together."

He's right – from the ground, you might see the rusted cadaver of a ship resting in a dune and think nothing of it. This is *Mad Max*, stuff like that is everywhere. But then you drive onto an outcrop here, or run down a gang of thugs there, and you'll notice that – buried amongst the sand – there's another couple of ships. From an air-balloon half a map away, you'll notice formations in the rocks that look… almost man-made. 'Wait', you think, 'that was a dockland'.

"It's not like we're asking you to understand everything on first sight, that's not our approach," continues Rooke. "We want you to see something in the distance and think 'Ah, this used to be an industrial area, I get it!' Putting those pieces together yourself is much more interesting than us telling you: 'Hey, you're in the old industrial area!' And once the artists figured *that* out, it became *much* easier to flesh out this sandy realm."

/// This forms an interesting parallel with the film – which was perhaps one of the least patronising action films we've seen in the last decade. It lets you make your own mind up about the characters, it doesn't spoil any of the world's mystery with exposition dumps, it doesn't hold your hand and tell you what to think. The game – from combat to exploration to vehicle customisation – follows suit.

"There was one point where we felt we were handholding too much, so we had to step back from that a bit," Rooke reveals when we ask why the studio took this more player-led approach to gameplay. "But it was uncomfortable. You see someone struggle in your game and your first instinct is 'We need to tell them what to do!' but that's not always the path to success. Self-discovery has a lot more worth than leaving everything on a plate."

When we start asking about how different the engine is being used here, compared to the *Just Cause* series, Rooke explains: "[The engine] doesn't just create the big open space; it makes that big open space feel like it should. The way it looks, the lighting, the weather, the way the landscape changes… if you just drive around and notice what the car is doing, you'll see how much the engine underneath is really doing."

/// "The thing about our vehicle… it needed to be heavy. It needed that raw, muscle car power, and the only way you can convince the player of that feeling is by having the physical part of that car feel *right*, have the effects feel *right*," explains Rooke. "You can feel those tyres spinning, the engine working. And the audio, too, all works in line with what's happening – you change something on the car, and you can hear the difference in the sound it makes." The studio spared no expense in making sure all varieties of V8 and V6 engines were *actually* recorded.

"That was so important to us, and perhaps that's what's made us the most different to other games. Of course, if you look at a *Forza* game, everything is very detailed and will sound *just right*, but we wanted the muscle car identity… we wanted the fiction of the sound; not just a car sound, but the way we can use it in an offensive, aggressive way."

When you're spending as much time in your car as you do in *Mad Max*, this is important – the main story revolves around you getting all the best parts for the mechanical beast, so the hours and horsepower the studio has dedicated to the car make sense. But you begin to form this Bachelardian relationship with the vehicle, it begins to become more than a car to you. It inspires a religious fervour in your erstwhile in-game companion (the loyal War Boy, Chumbucket), and that's kind of infectious.

Better yet, it even begins to form narratives in its own right as you mess about. "Today I was testing out something," Rooke laughs. "I was in an NPC's car, I was trying to drive off, but a sniper nested in a tower blew out one of my tyres. I kept going, but was dragging a bit because of this blow-out. For some reason, this sniper *really* had my number, and managed to blow out another wheel. I'm still trying to get away and then he blew out another. I'm there, crawling around on *one tyre* and he manages to get that too! This is a situation I've *never* been in before, you know? It was a great experience – it's not like we sat down in some design meeting somewhere and said 'Right, let's have our snipers do this!' It's just what the sniper did. That gives you a player created narrative – that gives you the opportunity to tell these stories."

It's that level of iterative action, that level of accidental algorithmical magic – that we expect from an open world game. And *Mad Max* delivers it in spades.

> "Self-discovery has a lot more worth than leaving everything on a plate"
>
> **FRANK ROOKE** GAME DIRECTOR, AVALANCHE STUDIOS



Above: The vehicular combat is the natural evolution of anything you'd find in a *Just Cause* game – the tethering and tearing in particular is a treat.

Right: Combat feels like the *Arkham* series', albeit with a little more *crunch*. If you manage to get Max into his rage state, some of the environmental finishers are brutal and – dare we say it – a little over the top

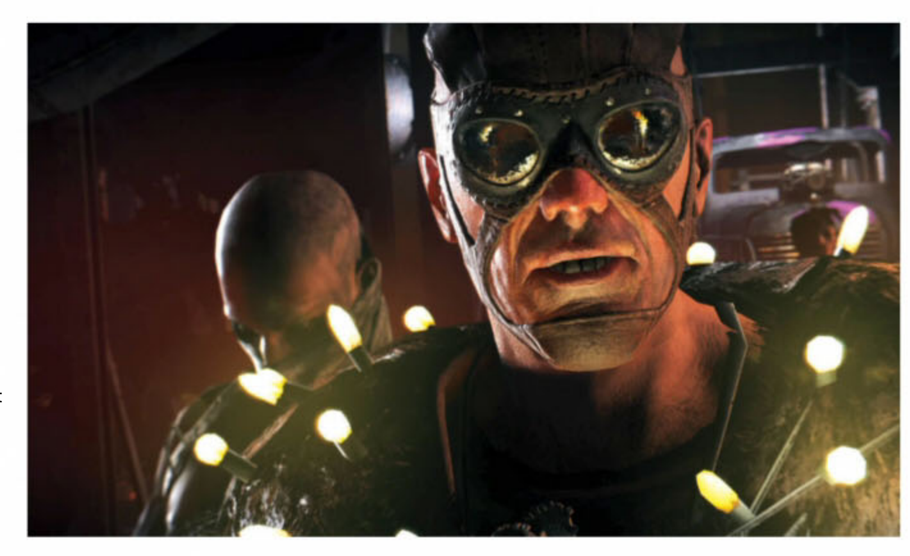


Above: Dynamic weather effects make the wasteland seem like an even more dangerous place than it already is…

A MAN THAT WALKS ALONE

WE SPOKE WITH Magnus Lindberg – sound designer on the game – and he taught us something we never knew before: making it sound like you're all alone in the world is *really* hard.

"You can't just make a façade of audio… you are actually walking through the environment, so the environment has to feed back audio based on that. It's a different specification doing that audio experience for a game instead of a movie… If you went through a ravine, footsteps echo back at you. We went out recording with impulsers just to get that sound – how does it sound when I walk through this ravine, and then how do we emulate that in the game? So it is actually simulated for the players to hear for themselves in the real world."





Left: The art team at Avalanche has been picking apart all the source material available to it in recreating the wasteland – but they haven't been scared of taking artistic license where needed.

Below: Though the shotgun is a powerful force, you're not going to want to rely too heavily on it – ammo in the wasteland is scarce, and who knows how long it'll be before you find more…







LIFE IN THE DESERT

JUST BECAUSE MAD MAX exists in a world where *everything's gone wrong*, it doesn't mean that there aren't moments of serenity, even within the desolate Wasteland.

"As a small example, we decided to pretend that one little species of cicada had survived the holocaust, and they reside in a very specific dense little bush," explains Magnus Lindberg. "And somewhere in there is a little forest place. And that is the closest experience you can get to a real-life environment in *Mad Max*. It's a Wasteland version of real life, and it's extremely weird. But you get it. It sounds like a forest, but a dead version, a Wasteland version of it. You'll find [things like this] everywhere, you just need to pay attention to them."

Super Mario Maker

CONCEPT ■ As the *Super Mario* series marks 30 years of existence, Nintendo celebrates by letting you create your own *Mario* levels with interchangeable skins and themes

The keys to the Mushroom Kingdom

And so *Mario* is finally joining the play, create and share generation. The idea of handing over the reins of the *Mario* universe to us, its players, seems like something so obvious now that we have to wonder why Nintendo didn't experiment with the idea before. In the years since the Nintendo DS launched, this makes a lot of sense, but here we are. A *Super Mario Bros.* game where you get to make the levels and share them with the world. It's a great idea, although not one without concerns.

Distilling the design genius of Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka into a drag and drop menu system might appear at first to be reductionist. Thankfully, as we explored the interchangeable skins of the different *Mario* worlds (the NES original, *SMB3*, *World* and *New Super Mario Bros.* to be precise) and browsed our block selections it didn't so much demystify the classic *Super Mario* experiences, so much as remind us of their greatness. Skill is still required in the making of a truly engaging and entertaining level, it's just that you don't need to learn how to code first to pull it off with *Super Mario Maker*. Dragging some pipes around on the Wii U Gamepad doesn't mean you can create the new world 1:1 any more than a paint by numbers means you can create a new Mona Lisa.

/// So, really *Super Mario Maker* is a step into the weird and wonderful minds of a generation of gamers who have grown up on these games and the examples we've already seen are impressive. It didn't take long, for instance, for someone to build a level that doesn't require you to move the controls at all. Mario gets flung around by objects and springs to the end of the level. More creative types have looked to take advantage of the amiibo functionality of the game, allowing you to change Mario into different characters. For example, we enjoyed a *Legend Of Zelda* themed level with meandering dungeon paths, warping doors and a power-up mushroom that turned us into Link. If you have the Link amiibo and create a level with this power-up it will work for everyone, even if they don't have the matching NFC figure.

Making the levels yourself is really where the joy of this game sits, though, and as you brush your stylus across the Gamepad, the inspiration drawn from *Mario Paint* becomes clear. Using a base grid as a guide you can spread blocks around the screen with ease, each merging with like objects to create smooth turf, walls and giant toadstools. As you sketch out your design on the Gamepad you can watch a hand appear on your TV, drawing the same content directly to your level. It's all a little surreal, but rather fun.

/// And fun in *Super Mario Maker* is about having as few limitations as possible. The team has put no restrictions on what types of enemies you can use in each level or when. If you want a blooper to appear in Bowser's castle, leaping out of a pipe and then flying away on wings, that's probably something you could do. Characters from later titles have been given 8-bit redesigns so you can use them with whatever game skin you like and change it on the fly as you design your world. Vertically and horizontally, you have a great area to make your ultimate *Mario* stage packed full of enemies, traps, power-ups and secrets.

Super Mario Maker isn't diluting the magic of these games so much as unleashing it. With 100 levels to play on the disc and countless more to follow from the community, with smart amiibo functionality and so much potential for mash-up stages, this is the perfect way to celebrate *Super Mario Bros.*' 30th year.

> "Want a Goomba to wear a Piranha Plant on its head, build a tower 10 Goombas tall or make a Piranha Plant fly?"
>
> PRESS RELEASE, NINTENDO

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo EAD Group No. 4
Release: 11 September 2015
Players: 1

Developer Profile

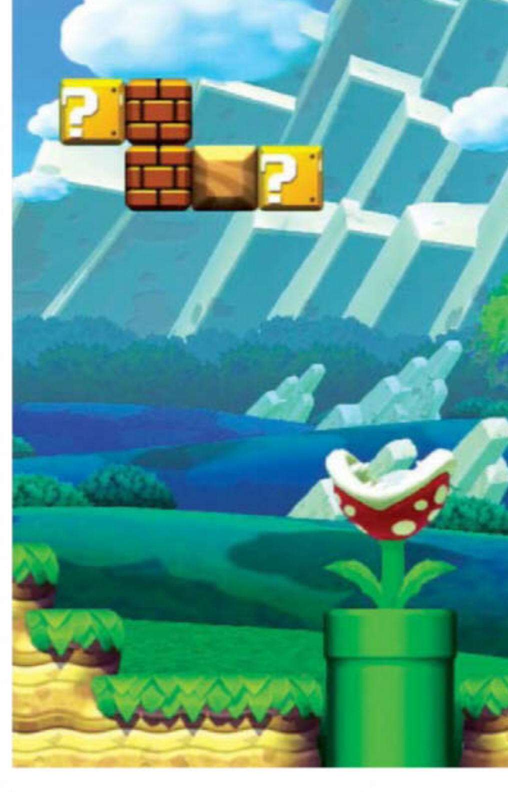
As the home of the *New Super Mario Bros.* series, Nintendo EAD Group No. 4 was the only team that could bring the 2D platforming of the NES and SNES classics into the modern era. Headed by original *Super Mario Bros.* assistant director and designer Takashi Tezuka, this is a team steeped in experience with the series.

Developer History

Yoshi Touch & Go
2005 [Nintendo DS]
New Super Mario Bros.
2006 [Nintendo DS]
New Super Mario Bros. U
2012 [Wii U]
Pikmin 3
2015 [Wii U]

High Point

The Wii U debut of the *New Super Mario Bros.* formula was the best example of 2D *Mario* gaming in the modern era. The classic games may still feel more challenging, but this was the best evolution of these classics to date.





■ Above: One of the most enjoyable parts of creating your own level is being able to flip between stage styles at any time.



FROM TOOL TO TOY

According to Nintendo, *Super Mario Maker*'s tools started out as being for design purposes only, making it easier than ever for the studio team to conceive and create levels for the *New Super Mario Bros.* series. However, after long-time director and producer of the *Mario* series Takashi Tezuka saw its potential and similarities to *Mario Paint* (a game he had been thinking of rebooting), he pushed for it to be turned into a full game experience. And with that, Just in time for a major *Mario* anniversary, we have *Super Mario Maker*. Now we're keen to see if this idea can be translated to a 3DS release, where it would likely thrive.



■ Above: Throw a mushroom on an enemy as you're creating a level and they'll double in size, much like Mario does. It means you can create some real monsters to face in your stages. Below Left: Even stages that didn't originally exist in the old games have been reinterpreted. Now we can see 8-bit Mario in space. Below: If you thought water levels were annoying before, *Super Mario Maker* may cause some long term trauma.



Below: *Need For Speed* has come back stronger than ever after a two year break, offering a diverse range of gameplay options and insane customisation options, to entice every arcade racer fan.

Need For Speed

CONCEPT *Need For Speed* is back after taking a two year break, as Ghost Games looks to combine everything fans have loved across the franchises' impressive 20 year history

Sounds of the underground

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC
Origin: Sweden
Publisher: EA
Developer: Ghost Games
Release: 3 November 2015
Players: TBC

Developer Profile

Comprised of over 80 per cent of ex-Criterion staff members, Ghost Games was formed to continue upholding the *Need For Speed* legacy for EA after the legendary studio responsible for *Burnout* scaled back its operations to focus on smaller racing experiences back in 2013.

Developer History

Need For Speed: Rivals **2013 [Multi]**
Need For Speed: Most Wanted **2012 [Multi]**
Burnout Paradise **2008 [Multi]**
Burnout 3: Takedown **[PS2, Xbox]**

High Point

Need For Speed: Most Wanted essentially redesigned the open-world racing experience. It took the sublime template of *Burnout Paradise* and expanded upon it massively. We haven't looked back since.

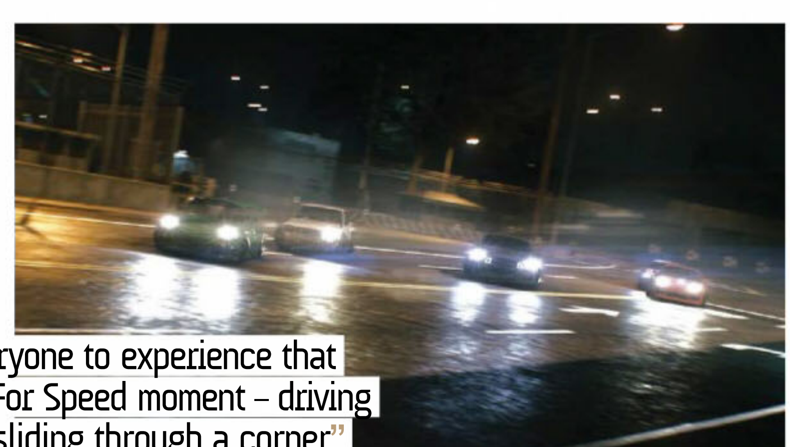
***Need For Speed* is no mere reboot of an ageing franchise, desperately racing to find relevance in a new generation.** It's so much more than that, with developer Ghost Games looking to take a 20 year legacy and distil it into the ultimate arcade racer experience – a greatest hits compilation of high-octane, *NFS* action – and you know what, it might just pull it off.

It seems like a natural step for the franchise, especially as *Need For Speed* – and the studio staff behind the branding of Ghost Games – has catered to so many different driving preferences over the years. But whether you're after the open-world freedom of *Most Wanted*, the police chases of *Hot Pursuit*, the street racing of *Underground* or even the risk taking thrill ride that was the *Burnout* franchise, 2015's *Need For Speed* has it all. Better still, it doesn't play like a hot mess.

One of the most striking aspects of *Need For Speed* is how it looks and handles so much like the refined and polished gameplay trailers doing the rounds. It is rather uncanny, truth be told. Rain thunders across the roads of Ventura Bay (EA's fictional Los Angeles), headlights cut through the horizon and, most importantly, your fully customisable, super charged vehicle burns rubber through corners and rips menacingly down straights. Ongoing traffic swerves to avoid decimation at speeds of 200mph and the camera cuts lowly beneath your outrageous boy-racer spoiler as you hit the handbrake to drift your tyres into oblivion. *Need For Speed* looks and plays fantastically, the results of an extended development cycle, and it might be the first serious contender *Forza Horizon* has had in a long time.

Early hands-on suggest that EA won't need to graphically downgrade *Need For Speed* when it launches later this year

Impressive still, is how *Need For Speed* unshackles itself from the restrictions of your typical point-to-point racing experience. Placing in first place isn't always as important as doing it in style, thanks to the inclusion of what Ghost Games has dubbed the '8-Player Rep Attack'. It's essentially its version of a score attack game hidden beneath the game's hood; whether you'd rather be deftly near-missing cars or showing off your slick drifting, *Need For Speed* rewards you with points for playing how you like to play – and that all contributes to your overall reputation with different street factions. It's an interesting and, at this stage, successful method of getting players to test different car configurations and racing styles, something the likes of *Project Gotham Racing* and *Horizon* struggled with. For a game that's all about getting noticed, *Need For Speed* is doing a fantastic job itself of standing out from the crowd in a packed and ever-impressive genre.



"We want everyone to experience that perfect Need For Speed moment – driving insanely fast, sliding through a corner"
MARCUS NILSSON GHOST GAMES





Above: When key targets enter the arena you can make sure your camera is always pointing at them, making combat in 3D space much simpler.

Star Fox Zero

CONCEPT Essentially a reboot of the *Star Fox* series, *Zero* sees all the classic characters return with a host of new control schemes inspired by the Wii U GamePad

Turning back the clock

***Star Fox Zero* is currently feeling like a mixed bag of the innovative and the familiar**. There's definitely some new functionality and a new control system to get to grips with (more on this shortly), but the game is also essentially a reimagining of the original *Star Fox* titles, rebooting the experience and as such it feels like we've done a lot of this before.

That was our initial impression grabbing a GamePad and playing the game in its latest incarnation. The opening level feels like almost exactly the kind of opening stage we had already experienced with *Star Fox 64* (*Lylat Wars* in the UK) on N64. The on rails flight through a level, large mechs throwing beams you need to dodge, close formations of enemies chasing down Slippy, and Falco complaining about you hogging all the kills. For the boss battle we move into a free-roam arena battle with dogfighting and a large ship to take down. We've been there before, which doesn't mean it wasn't enjoyable as such, just not all that new. The opening stage felt a little sluggish, but one thing did help break through the fog; the controller.

The Walker form of the Arwing has been criticised, largely for moving like a chicken, but it plays just fine in terms of combat experience.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo EAD Group No. 5, PlatinumGames
Release: Q4 2015
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Nintendo's Group No. 5 team has to be one of its most commercially successful, having been the developers of the *Wii Fit* titles since the launch of the Wii. Since then it has also looked after the *Steel Divers* titles, but this is the first legacy title the studio has taken charge of for Nintendo.

Developer History

Wii Fit **2007 [Wii]**
Star Fox 64 3D **2011 [3DS]**
Wii Fit U **2013 [Wii U]**
Steel Diver: Sub Wars **2014 [3DS]**

High Point

The amazing success of *Wii Fit* and the Wii go hand in hand. Boxed with every console, it was an incredible tech demo that spoke to casual gamers and families in a way no gaming experience had for many years.

The GamePad is at the heart of this new approach to *Star Fox* as you use it as a cockpit view and make use of the gyroscopic controls to aim with more precision. Taking your eyes off the TV for periods as you line up the perfect shot is a little disorientating at first, but it started to come to us as we progressed. The longer we played the more the pacing made sense. Nintendo is expecting you to take your time to learn the controls again with this one. It wants you to play with the aiming and master the sequence of enemies appearing on screen. *Star Fox* is best on the second, third and fourth run, as you memorise the patterns and become proficient with your Arwing.

Sensing our doubts though, a Nintendo representative urged us to try another level. This was a fully 3D space sequence, with all-out dogfighting, more enemies and much higher speeds. Looping, doubling back and laying down support fire in this more intense cauldron of combat was much better. This was more in keeping with our memory of what a *Star Fox* game is supposed to feel like. As ever, satisfying our expectations and memories of past games is a tough ask for Nintendo. It's very close to capturing the spirit of the original games and giving us a deeper level of control. With PlatinumGames helping out, it's getting close, but we'll need to see more.



The totem pole of Links is this game's standout new mechanic, used for solving puzzles and taking on bosses. The lowest Link has to move you all around while the top Link can interact with your surroundings.







The Legend Of Zelda: Tri Force Heroes

CONCEPT Nintendo attempts to bring multiplayer to the world of *Zelda* once again with a three-player experience that relies on co-op combat and puzzle-solving

Link gets into cosplay

We hope you're not too precious about your *Zelda* experiences, because this is going to be something a little different. The *Four Swords Adventures* of GameCube is probably the closest comparison we can make to *Tri Force Heroes*, as it similarly attempted to filter the core adventure, exploration and puzzling experience we know and love to make it multiplayer-friendly. We actually really loved the attempt, and this three-player variant feels similar, if a little more linear in spirit.

But *Tri Force Heroes* is breaking even further away from tradition in its approach to traditional *Zelda* gameplay. For a start, you can forget about the classic tunic look if you want to get the most from this game. Many stages lean towards a speciality – archery or bomb-throwing, for instance – and by selecting a costume to wear at the beginning of the stage you can give yourself a proficiency in that field. For instance wearing the Kokiri outfit will allow you to fire three arrows at once, giving you a better chance of hitting your target when you're in totem formation.

Which brings us to the central co-op mechanic of the game. Where *Four Swords* had its train of Links, this has a tower. Leaping on each other's shoulders, the bottom Link controls movement while the top interacts. You could be attacking bosses from a higher vantage point, hitting switches or simply using the additional height to reach a new ledge with a key. It's a very simple mechanic that makes good use of the 3D visuals and effects on the 3DS, as well as being a new twist that has lead to a wide array of new puzzles and enemies to fight.

The gameplay is fast and frantic, much more so than you might typically expect from a *Zelda* game. And the levels are quick too. Each stage feels very self-contained, and while there may be something of an overarching story to the game, we got no sense of it. At only a few minutes per level, it was more about managing your heart meter (lose or collect a heart and it counts for everyone), grabbing keys, unlocking puzzles and taking on bosses in a series of small stages.

Perhaps most importantly, though, this is a social experience. With only one copy of the game needed to play locally and online play available, *Tri Force Heroes* has a lot of features intended to allow you to communicate quickly with the team. You essentially have two rows of Link emotes on your touch screen, allowing you to quickly instruct, celebrate and commiserate with your fellow Links. Your emote appears at the bottom of their screen and if you keep tapping it gets bigger and bigger. It's a light, fun feature, which sums up our experience of this game so far rather nicely. It's not the immersive world of adventure we prefer from our *Zelda* games, but it has enough about it to be a fun distraction while we await the main attraction next year.

"Single-player mode allows the player to rent two paper dolls to take along to complete the team of three and face challenges in dungeons"

PRESS RELEASE, NINTENDO

INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo EAD Group No. 3
Release: Q3
Genre: Puzzle adventure
Players: 1-3

Developer Profile

Eiji Aonuma's *Zelda* team is one of the most consistent at Nintendo, regularly delivering engaging and memorable adventures on Wii, Wii U, DS and 3DS in the last decade. *Tri Force Heroes* feels like a return to its *Four Swords* multiplayer.

Developer History

The Legend Of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass **2007 [DS]**
The Legend Of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds **2013 [3DS]**

High Point

A Link Between Worlds was a tricky sequel to the beloved *A Link To The Past*, but it did a great job of evolving on the original experience while adding a new 3D twist.



PREPARE TO DIE

IT LOOKS like *Dark Souls III* is more concerned with making you feel supremely under-powered, compared to previous games. What we mean by that, specifically, is that instead of mobs of enemies coming in at you, waiting in line to attack, you'll be seeing more one-on-one encounters in *Dark Souls III* (or a-few-on-one, tops). What makes it worse is that the enemies have been programmed to come at you from all sides; expect ambushes, traps and lures galore. From some of the images here, you can also tell there will be a much larger focus on enemy scale, too – from dragons to giants, your enemies this time around will be *even more* punishing that *Dark Souls II*'s most threatening combatants. Be warned: you will die.

PAST GLORIES

INTERESTINGLY ENOUGH, the game design team has changed from the one that put *Dark Souls II* together – directorship of the game has actually been passed on to *Souls* newcomer Isamu Okano (the creative mind behind S*teel Battalion: Heavy Armor*). Series auteur and mainstay Hidetaka Miyazaki is focusing more on iterating the gameplay systems and level design. As such, you might notice a shift in tone – the Victorian stylings of *Bloodborne* are out, replaced by a more Gothic world construction (which apparently predates anything we've seen in the *Souls* series so far). As such, you've got elder beasts like dragons still roaming the world… and you'd better believe they see you as prey.

Dark Souls III

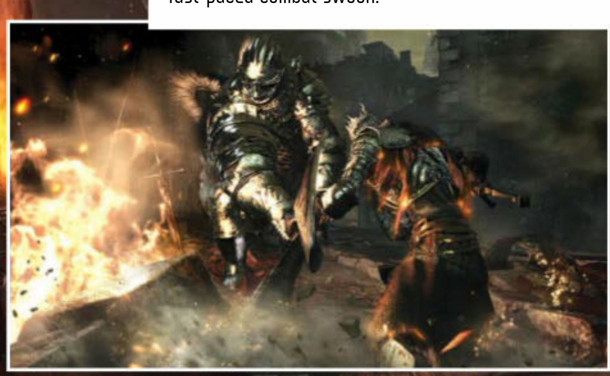
CONCEPT There are huge monsters that want to kill you. There are buildings that, somehow, want to kill you. The developer wants to kill you. This is *Dark Souls*. You will die

A Hunter's Dream

Miyazaki is quickly becoming a god-like figure amongst the hardcore players of the industry – he's revered, feared, worshipped. How can one man come up with so many challenges, so many combat puzzles, so many dark, bleak and depressing ideas that infect your mind as your muscles twitch on your pad, trying desperately to keep you alive? *Dark Souls* as a series has become synonymous with struggle, with persistence, with terror. It's amazing that – four games later (including *Bloodborne*) – the setting of the series hasn't gotten old: the Gothic architecture remains as imposing, the weighty mechanics remain as stressful (but in a *good* way, right?) and the world remains so full of mystery. Miyazaki tells his story in maps, in encounters. He's unconventional, and his newest game promises more of that same trail-blazing developmental talent.

STEEL YOURSELF

CONTINUING ON from the combat evolution that *Bloodborne* introduced, *Dark Souls III* takes a few of the main conceits of the series so far, takes them out of the code, and replaces them with something altogether newer and shinier. There's now a 'ready stance' for example – attacking from this stance allows you to perform cinematic attacks on the game's new *huge* enemies: think of it like a parry that requires some strategy to pull off, rather than just twitch reactions. Miyazaki has noted that he intends for *Dark Souls III* to have a much greater focus on player agility, too – something that'll make fans of *Bloodborne*'s more fast-paced combat swoon.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Bandai Namco Entertainment
Developer: From Software
Release: 2016
Players: TBC

Developer Profile

From Software is known for its work on the *Souls* series and spiritual successor to the brand, *Bloodborne*, but let's not forget how the studio made its name – mostly working on the *Armored Core* series.

Developer History

King's Field
1994 [PlayStation]
Armored Core
1997 [PlayStation]
Demon's Souls
2009 [PS3]

High Point

Bloodborne proved to the world that the cult that had grown around *Dark Souls* was well-deserved, and that the 'ultra hard' gameplay translated well out of the successful series.



"TrackMania Turbo's gameplay is based on an easy to pick up, hard to master philosophy. The controls are simple – there are only four buttons!"

NADEO PRESS RELEASE



■ A new mode being offered by *TrackMania Turbo* is a two-player co-op experience in one car. The game aggregates your controller inputs to judge steering.

TrackMania Turbo

CONCEPT ■ High speed action racing that defies logic, physics and most car-based gaming conventions. *TrackMania* is insanity on four wheels

Arcade time attack racing at its best

If you've ever wanted to play a game that was somewhere between *F1*, *F-Zero*, *Mirror's Edge*, and a bizarre rollercoaster, then you really ought to have been paying attention to the *TrackMania* series. Since its earliest incarnation this franchise has been reaching insane speeds and throwing cars around impossibly complex tracks and now it's heading to consoles for the first time with *TrackMania Turbo*.

This is primarily twitch based gaming, far removed from the *Gran Turismos* or even *Need For Speeds* of this world. The closest comparisons in the racing genre are really games like *WipEout* where tracks are built around spectacle and speed more than anything else. The skill is in remembering the track, shaving time off your run and sometimes just surviving the course.

A typical *TrackMania* course will have you driving on a wall for at least 25 per cent of the track and upside down for at least ten per cent. *Turbo* is mixing things up with new play styles and expectations from its four track types, each challenging us in different ways.

■ *TrackMania* is a purely time attack experience, but you can have ghosts on the track if you want something to chase after.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC
Origin: France
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Nadeo
Release: 27 November 2015
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Founded in 2000 and bought by Ubisoft in 2009, Nadeo made its name with its frantic and logic-defying racing series *TrackMania*, offering intense solo action racing experiences. It also makes the *Virtual Skipper* series of simulators and has ventured out into *ShootMania*, an FPS, and upcoming *QuestMania*, an RPG.

Developer History

TrackMania **2003 [PC]**
TrackMania Sunrise **2005 [PC]**
Virtual Skipper 5: 32nd America's Cup: The Game **2007 [PC]**
ShootMania Storm **2013 [PC]**

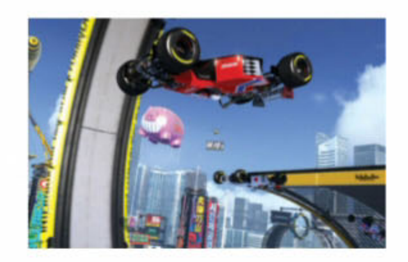
High Point

TrackMania Sunrise is probably Nadeo's best-rated game to date, but that was a decade ago. Moving to consoles for the first time with *Turbo* may yet prove to be this studio's greatest achievement.

International Stadium courses are your classic *TrackMania* experiences with plenty of speed, wall-riding, loops and death-defying jumps. You'll be slipping your car through gaps in the course to reach the next stretch of road, heart in throat the whole time. Rollercoaster Lagoon offers magnetised tracks so there's even more upside-down time although not quite at the same pace. Canyon Grand Drift is all narrow tracks and drifting around corners and finally Down & Dirty Valley is packed with jumps that require mid-air control. All in all, between these four themes you'll have 200 tracks to experience. And that's before we get to track creation.

You can also procedurally generate courses on the fly with the press of a button. It was a feature showcased live by Ubisoft and it looks to work by giving the game certain parameters as to difficulty and overall setting. Ultimately, it will mean several hundred courses are available to you within days of launch and potentially infinitely more as the months pass.

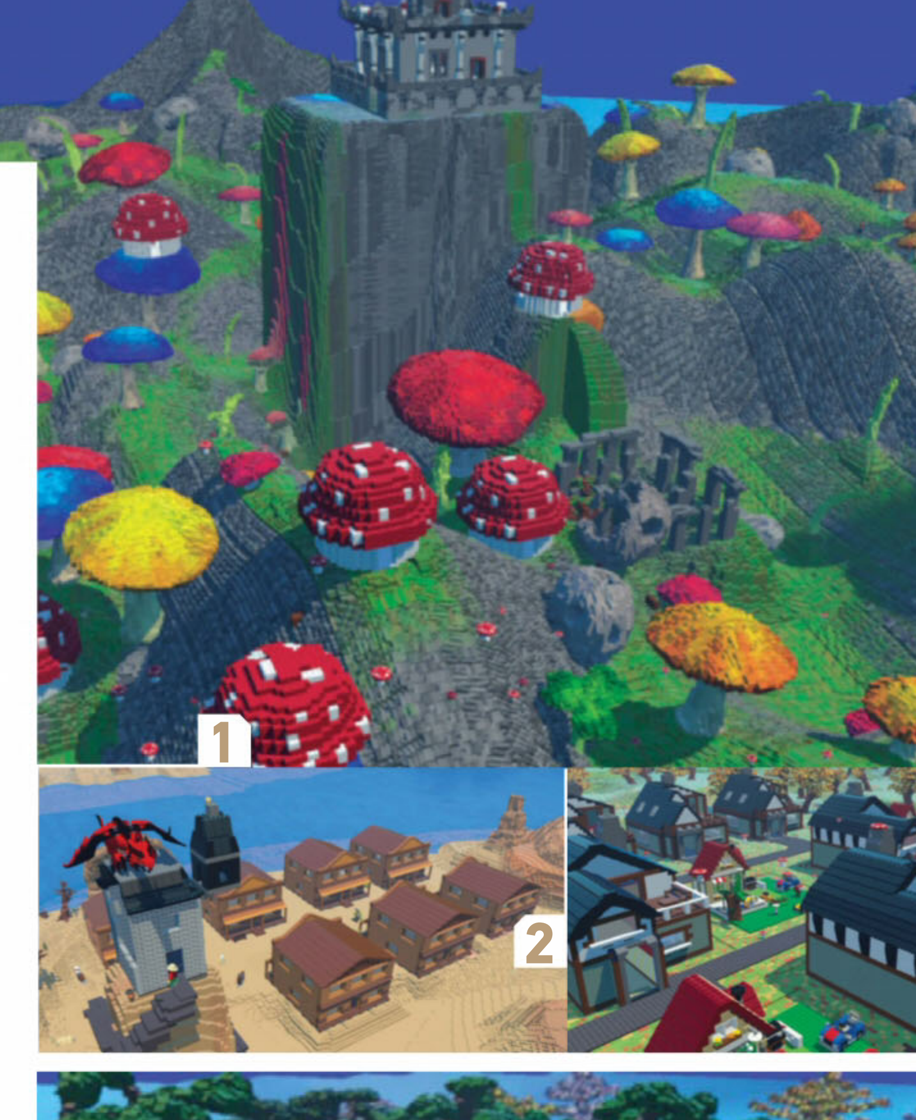
TrackMania doesn't have the kind of big-budget, super ambitious objectives that typically grab attention, but it does have the kind of addictive, frantic, rage-inducing gameplay that can turn a small racer into a classic. With the amount of content it's launching with on top of its play style, this should be on everyone's radar.



LEGO Worlds

CONCEPT ■ The original building blocks go full *Minecraft*, with all the creativity and intuitive systems you'd expect from the *LEGO* games nowadays

You didn't need any free time, right?



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
Developer: TT Games
Release: 2016 (full release)
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Operating since 1990, Traveller's Tales (now TT Games) has proved itself as a master of the licensed game – in more recent years, though, the studio has carved out a niche for itself as the 'LEGO' studio.

Developer History

Puggsy
1993 [Amiga, Mega-CD, Mega Drive
Sonic R
1998 [Sega Saturn
LEGO Rock Band
2009 [PS3, 360, Wii, DS]
LEGO Marvel Super Heroes
2013 [Multi]

High Point

Despite some dodgy flying mechanics, *LEGO Marvel Super Heroes* was one of the best child-friendly open-world games on the market when it released, and precious little has changed since.

***Minecraft* is a hefty throne to try and topple, but if anyone can do it, it's TT Games.** Specifically, TT's ability to translate all of real-life LEGO's strengths into videogames, because *Minecraft*'s appeal basically comes from LEGO in the first place. Those world-famous building blocks were translated online into *Infiniminer*, which then directly inspired *Minecraft*. And now we have *LEGO Worlds*: the game *Minecraft* seems to wish it could have been in the first place.

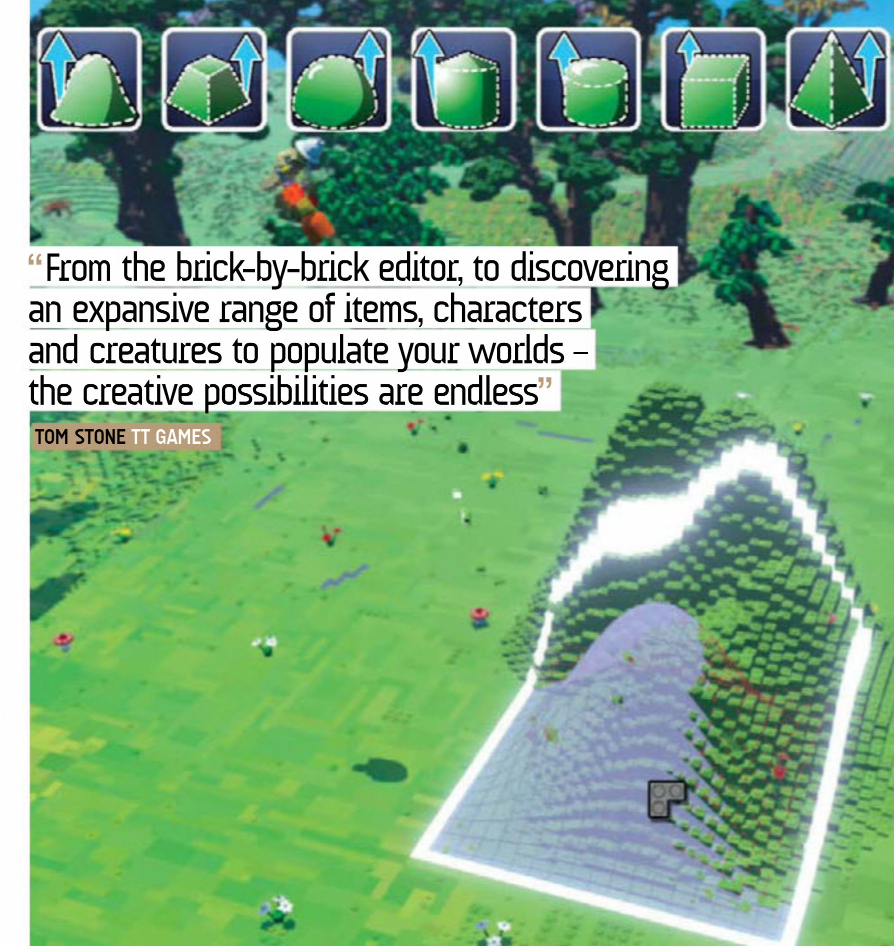
We've been toying around with the Early Access version and have noted a slew of similarities/differences the game shares with its voxel-based predecessors. Here are five things we've noticed about the game so far...

1 YOU CAN MAKE WHATEVER YOU WANT...

The core appeal of LEGO has always been the freedom it gives you – kids that were never very good at art, or writing, or generally *creating* could find the freedom of expression they wanted in LEGO (we used to try and recreate *Crash Bandicoot* levels in LEGO, for example). This sentiment is echoed in the game – want to make a Western-style ranch? Go ahead. What about a weird village with treehouses and riverside cottages? Fine. How about a hellish, barren landscape populated with naught but loneliness and danger? The world's your oyster.

2 ...BUT EVERYTHING'S THERE FOR YOU, AS WELL

The whole game relies on procedurally-generated worlds (hence the title). If you just keep moving from place to place on the map, you'll come across new combinations of sets that might not work, or they might work *really well*. There's so much variation in the LEGO sets – and new ones are released *all the time* – that we imagine the final build will be similar in scope to *No Man's Sky*. Just replace space travel with inter-dimensional hopscotch and you're thinking on the right lines. If this game syncs up with *LEGO Dimensions*, the potential for level-building is staggering.



"From the brick-by-brick editor, to discovering an expansive range of items, characters and creatures to populate your worlds – the creative possibilities are endless"
TOM STONE TT GAMES

3 IT'S TRYING TO BUILD A TOXIC-FREE COMMUNITY

As with everything online, there are elements of society that spread poison into the waters – *Minecraft* has it, console shooters have it, even 'child-only' online spaces like Club Penguin have it. Now that we're able to identify patterns in this kind of negative behaviour, though, developers are getting much more adept at surgically removing these elements of the community: *LEGO Worlds* plans to do this with a Like/Unlike system for how it tailors World Generation, a specific ID so you can invite *only* people you trust into your World, and there are a selection of online tools that can remove toxic people from your game. For a child-orientated game, this is an admirable move from Warner Bros. Interactive and TT Games.

4 EVERYTHING LEGO SHOULD EVENTUALLY BE PLAYABLE

So the LEGO franchise has covered just about everything now, right? We've had *The Simpsons* reimagined in block-form, we've had *Back To The Future* given the plastic treatment, *Jurassic Park* sets are being released, there's a whole *ton* of *Star Wars* LEGO out there… imagine if that was all thrown into one toybox, allowing you to do as you liked in-game with each properties cars, props, characters and environments? Well, as we understand it, that's the eventual plan with *LEGO Worlds* (licences permitting) and we can't wait to see the inevitable Bionicle Death Star trench runs…





5 IT'S A FAR MORE MOBILE AFFAIR THAN MINECRAFT

Minecraft has become known for the way it handles – to begin with, at least, it's a gentle sojourn through a calming world. Its five modes (Survival, Creative, Adventure, Spectator and Hardcore) all focus on different aspects of its creation-based core, but *LEGO Worlds* seems more concerned with allowing the player greater creativity than attaching itself to that pseudo-survival horror template *Minecraft* uses in its other modes. As such, your character can go anywhere at any time, deform and re-form the world at will, float above the clouds into space to admire their handywork or burrow into the ground to examine the pre-programmed cave formations whenever it pleases. It makes getting around a *lot* easier.

Dirty Bomb

CONCEPT ■ It's 2020 and London is a post-apocalyptic wasteland with no law and order – and you've been brought in to sort things out in this first-person shooter

■ Above: Each mercenary's approach to battle is unique – you won't be winning these games straight away. You need to learn your characters.

London is sick

'**Don't be a dick'.** That's the first (and most repeated) lesson Splash Damage gives you in the open beta of the game – and it's not just some throw away clause, either. Every game system in *Dirty Bomb* is positioned to prevent you from ruining the experience for yourself and other players. That blunt initial message sets out a motto for the rest of the game – it seems like a contract you've got to sign if you want to win this game: do the objectives, play your class right, *don't* be a dick.

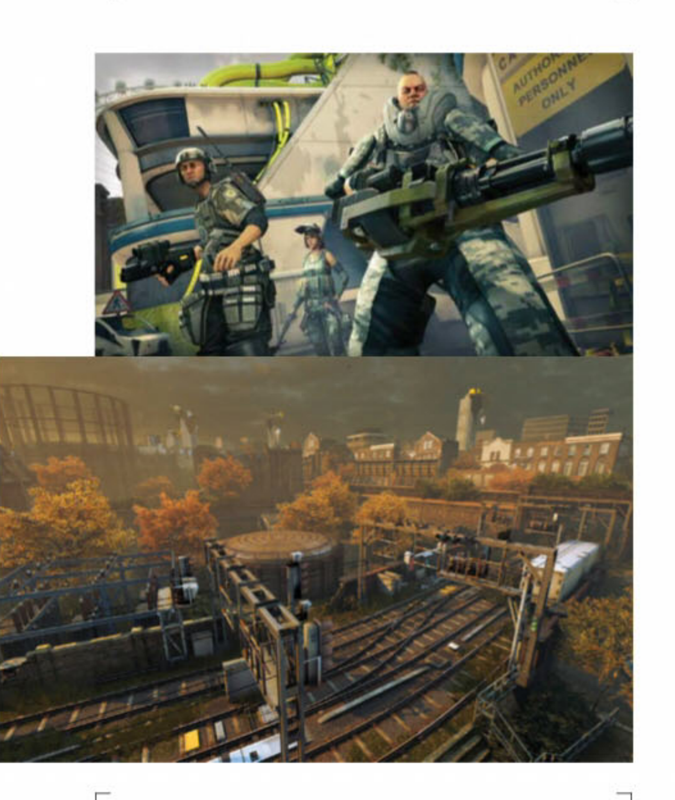
It seems to us that *Dirty Bomb* is very much the game that *Brink* wanted to be – to recap, *Brink* was the last major release from Splash Damage, and at the time of release, it seemed like the PS3/360-era shooter wanted to be the *Mirror's Edge* of FPS games. Sadly, though, that vision never really glued together – there were too many complex systems fighting for your attention in the game, and the balancing and execution of the gameplay suffered as a result.

/// *Dirty Bomb* seems to right those wrongs, though: it's the logical de-evolution of *Brink* that the studio needed to prove it could make. Movement is still an important facet of gameplay, but now it's less of a gimmick. That is to say, it functions *well* – remain static for too long and you'll die. Simple as that. You've got to run, you've got to move, you've got to be co-ordinated. There's no controller support or aim assist: this is a PC game for PC players. It's not been watered down one bit – if you want to live, you'll have to learn how.

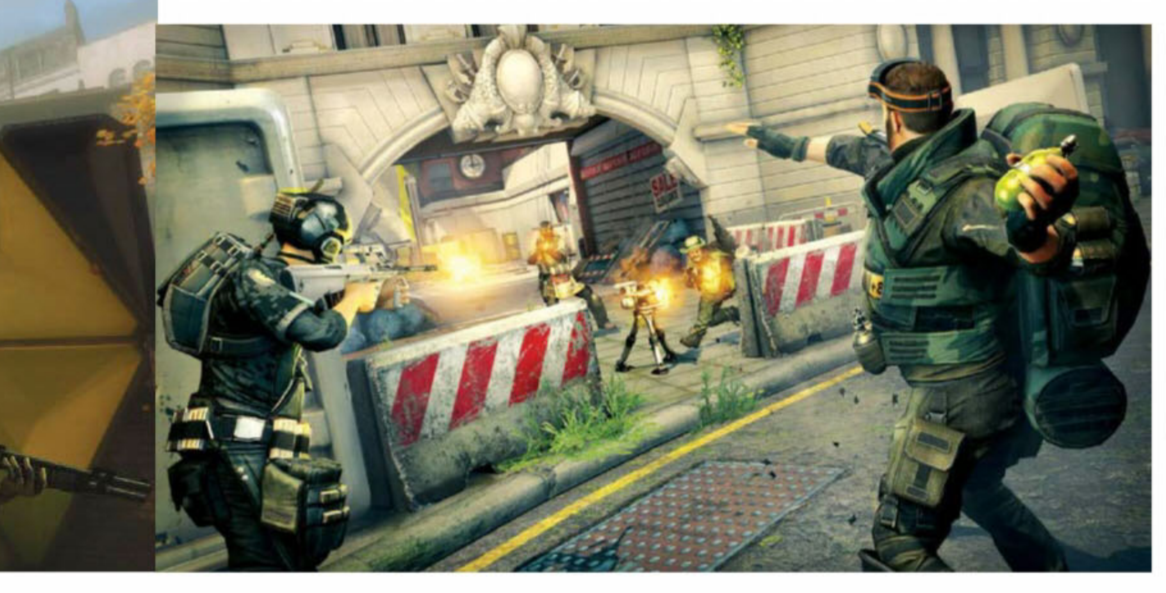
There are 19 different mercenaries to select (and you can hot-swap between respawns) and to Splash Damage's credit, each one feels functionally different from the last, even if they do all fit into the templated medic/assault/heavy/engineer/sniper skeletons. Each character has two weapons and two abilities – each class-specific and can be used for support, offense or defence.

The Merc roster is where the free-to-play elements of the game come in – when you sign up, you'll permanently have access to two playable fighters, with three offered on

> "Dirty Bomb takes us back to our roots as a company dedicated to making competitive multiplayer shooters for hardcore gamers"
> PAUL WEDGWOOD SPLASH DAMAGE



■ Above: Previous game *Brink* was hit hard by the PSN outage of 2011, which stopped its online portion from being fully appreciated at launch.



ENEMY TERRITORY

LIKE QUAKE WARS and *Wolfenstein* before it, *Dirty Bomb* carries Splash Damage's penchant for objective-based team-orientated action. You take turns to attack and defend varying obstacles – disarming bombs, protecting areas, getting a certain amount of kills… there are quite a lot of different victory conditions and if you want to win, you've got to really think about your class and your end-goal. It's all timed, too, so if you spend too long entrenched in firefights, you're going to lose. This is a hardcore game – and we like it.

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PC
Origin:
UK
Publisher:
Nexon America Inc
Developer:
Splash Damage
Release:
2015
Genre:
First-person shooter
Players:
1-20

Developer Profile

Splash Damage has been around since 2001, its developers making a name for themselves by modding *Quake 3* and providing in-game TV streaming solutions for broadcasting companies.

Developer History

Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory
2003 [PC, Mac]

Enemy Territory: Quake Wars
2007 [PC, PS3, 360]

Brink
2011 [PC, PS3, Xbox 360]

High Point

Brink might have released to a tepid review season, but the game behind the mediocrity was actually really enjoyable – some of the most satisfying class-based FPS gaming on console at the time

a rolling roster. Like *League Of Legends* or *Heroes Of The Storm*, other characters must be bought to be unlocked, and then you've got a card upgrade system that can be used to 'sidegrade' each equipable weapon on that character. We say 'sidegrade' because – from what we've played so far – *Dirty Bomb* doesn't seem to be pay-to-win. Spend money on a perk, and it won't automatically outclass you against your enemies: you're still liable to trade deaths, even if you're armed to the teeth and your opponent is a newly initiated agent.

/// But what's the point of all these interesting setups if they haven't got a world to exist in? We're fans of a bit of psycho-geographical deconstruction here at games™, but every now and then, it's nice to have a bit of fun in a location we know quite well. Enter 2020's London – a dilapidated and empty shell. Something's happened (we don't know what) but whatever it was turned the city into a playground for the world's leading mercenaries – they want to dig out the remaining money that still rests innate in the city's makeup. Just because they might, you know, die horribly of radiation poisoning doesn't mean they don't want to get a cut of whatever's left, right?

Dirty Bomb is available for you to play right now as an open beta so you can try out all of these new ideas and mechanics immediately. We'll review the full game once it hits general release and all of the bugs have been ironed out, but as a beta… this is doing quite well. It's building on the work the studio has been doing for over a decade and seems to have the balance right not only in terms of mechanics, but also style and handling that divided opinion in the past. It had our curiosity, but now it's got our attention.



Above: This is a PC-only game that doesn't patronise the keyboard/mouse player in any way. That alone is worth your attention. Below: Tactics and teamwork are important if you want to hit the objectives, rather than just get kills.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

THAT WHICH SLEEPS

Format: PC
Publisher: King Dinosaur Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



THAT WHICH *Sleeps* is a turn-based strategy game that puts the player in the shoes of an ancient being that was sealed away in ages past, returning to shape the world to its will. It's a Cthulu simulator that wants to reimagine the god game. When you creep out of your slumber, you must remain hidden until your strength has returned enough (think *The Lord Of The Rings*' Sauron), and then you've got to manipulate a living reactive world into a life of evil.

FRAGMENTS OF HIM

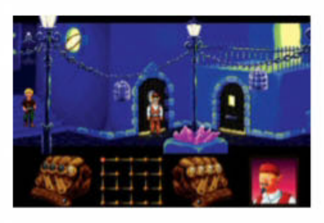
Format: PC, Xbox One
Publisher: SassyBot Studios
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



FRAGMENTS OF *Him* is a game that takes an interactive route through the fiction of loss – you play as a guy named Will that's suffered from a sudden, jarring death. You're not there, but *you* are – that is, you as a player observe the world around you coming to terms with Will's death. You see Will's boyfriend Harry observe the empty flat, you see Mary, Will's lonely grandmother, who feels betrayed by a society now alien to her… it's heavy.

FORGE

Format: PS4
Publisher: Forge Team
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



A FAN-MADE sequel to LucasArts' seminal *LOOM*, *FORGE* takes the old ideas that have been circling the web since the early Nineties and makes them a reality – Forge Team is hiring in specialist pixel artists, sound designers and writers that have all been shaped by the LucasArts adventure games of generations gone by. As such, you can expect rich, colour-heavy puzzles and so-obscure-they-hurt-your-mind solutions to seemingly simple tasks.

VA-11 HALL-A

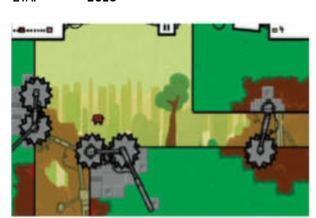
Format: PC, Vita
Publisher: WolfGame
Developer: SukebanGames
ETA: 2016



DYSTOPIAN CYBERPUNK stories are getting old – there are only so many human-condition story conventions we can suck up before we get tired of the same way they're regurgitated. *VA-11 Hall-A* sidesteps that by examining the people in these worlds, rather than the companies that run them. You're job is described as 'bartending action'. Converse with the citizens of this neon city and serve them the right things, based on their feelings and missions.

SUPER MEAT BOY: FOREVER

Format: PC, Android, iOS
Publisher: Team Meat
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2015



THIS IS basically the original *Super Meat Boy* game but with the two-man creative team behind it reimagining the whole thing as a touch-based game. Think *Rayman Fiesta Jump* or *King Of Thieves* – Meat Boy runs all by himself, and you've got to hit the screen at precisely the right times to overcome obstacles and enemies. It's not just an endless runner: there are warp zones, chapters, bosses, secrets and more.

OWLBOY

Format: PC,
Publisher: D-Pad Studio
Developers: In-house
ETA: 2015



THIS GAME has been in development forever, but a recent appearance at MineCon has proved that the title is alive and well. Calling itself 'a vertical platform adventure set in the sky', *OwlBoy* intends to reshape the landscape of the traditional platformer. It wants to move the genre away from a reliance on level design-based puzzles and into a more creative sphere, and plans to do so with excellent art, world-building and storytelling.

CHASM

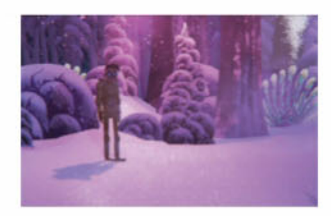
Format: PC, PS4, Vita
Publisher: Discord Games, Inc.
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2015



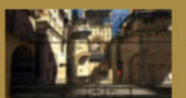
CHASM IS a procedurally-generated metroidvania game that was due to come out last year, but has silently been pushed back (still no solid release date). Chasm's uber-detailed pixel-art scans really well across the screen – especially when moving at speed – and the variety of environments is phenomenal… especially when you consider the whole game is set in and around *one* mountainside village.

THE ARTFUL ESCAPE OF FRANCIS VENDETTI

Format: 3DS
Publisher: Beethoven & Dinosaur
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q4 2015



THE DEVELOPMENT of this David Bowie simulator is a truly odd one – the main mind behind the game (Johnny Galvatron) once toured across the Pacific with Def Leppard, played festivals with Kiss, and then went back to Australia to write a novel. Now, his attention has turned to games, and the narrative-led experience he's building has just been granted $17,000 by Epic to achieve completion. Not bad, for a first game!



CANCELLED – The Crossing (PC, Xbox 360)

Announced seven years ago by Arkane Studios, the game has been a source of constant mystery… until this month when enterprising forum-goers unearthed its definite cancellation.

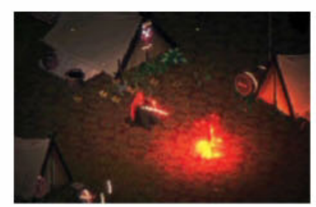


DELAYED – Project X Zone 2 (3DS)

We're surprised this game even got a sequel – it's not the most marketable thing in the world – but that hasn't deterred Bandai Namco. It just means the release date's been pushed to next Spring.

EITR

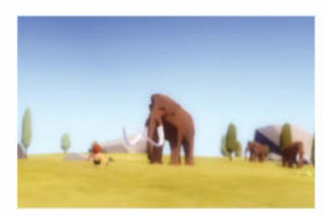
Format: **PS4, PC**
Publisher: **Devolver Digital**
Developer: **Derity /Eneme Interactive**
ETA: **2015**



NOT ONLY do you play as a brutal shield-maiden in this game, but the procedurally generated game has a whole slew of systems that make our mouths water. The fantastic 16-bit style aside, you've got some of the tightest parrying/blocking mechanics we've seen in a 2D action game, as well as a procedurally generated loot system and a 'favour' mechanic that has the gods judge you as you fight: do well and they'll smile upon you…

BEFORE

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Facepunch Studio**
Developers: **In-house**
ETA: **2016**



THE DEVELOPER of *Rust* has decided to leave all that grim realism behind and focus on something altogether more… accessible. *Before* is a survival game that takes place in the Stone Age and has mastered the low-poly art style it's chosen to run with it. As a player, you'll take charge of an entire tribe, managing everything from foraging to hunting, all the while the tribe comes up with its own belief systems and hierarchies.

ALLISON ROAD

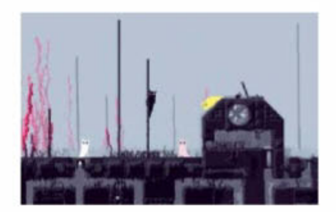
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Christian Kesler**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBA**



ALLISON ROAD is the sequel to a game that doesn't exist. Bear with us. We're talking about *P.T* – the teaser to the Kojima/Guillermo del Toro collaboration that never happened. Since *P.T* got taken down from PSN (the only place you could legally play it), *Silent Hill* fans have been distraught. Luckily for us, Christian Kesler decided to learn the ins and outs of *Unreal Engine 4* and began to put a spiritual sequel to the game together… but with one twist – it's set in Britain.

RAIN WORLD

Format: **PC, Vita**
Publisher: **Joar Jakobssson / James Primate**
Developers: **In-house**
ETA: **2016**



RAIN WORLD is a pixel game that has something much deeper than its initial two-dimensional presentation would suggest: it's got one of the best physics engines we've ever seen ticking away behind that 16-bit visual curtain. The water, the animations, the way the enemies move… all of it is superbly done, and the chaos that ensues in some of the more complex levels is mind-boggling.

PAVILION

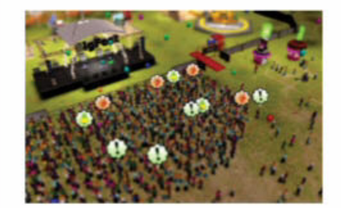
Format: **PC, PS4, Vita**
Publisher: **Visiontrick Media**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBA 2016**



PAVILION SELLS itself as a 'fourth person' game. When we first saw that, we creased our brows. We were cynical. Then we looked into it and it started to make sense – there is a main character to the game, but you don't control him, and he isn't your avatar. You've got to find other ways to interact with him, influence him and force him to do what needs to be done. You play as the world, and you have a goal. It's innovative, and beautiful.

BIGFEST

Format: **PSVita**
Publisher: **Sony Computer Entertainment**
Developer: **On The Metal**
ETA: **2016**



WE HAVE no idea if *BigFest* is ever going to come out, but it's the sort of first-party game that Sony really needs to prove what a versatile console the Vita can be. Imagine if you were in charge of putting on Glastonbury while also having the opportunity to discover real-life bands from banks and streams of unsigned music – it's a great vision, but one (we think) might never get released…

YIIK

Format: **PS4, Vita**
Publisher: **AckkStudios LLC!**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q4 2015**



FOR SOME reason, an elevator goes berserk and claims the life of a young woman. Protagonist and unemployed college grad Alex Eggleson takes to a Nineties message board to look into what happened and is directed to look for the 'Death Cab'. En route to find this motorised anomaly, Alex teams up with old friends and uncovers some trippy stuff – including a dungeon that exists solely for grinding and over 400 scripted pages of story.

ENTER THE GUNGEON

Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Devolver Digital**
Developer: **Dodge Roll**
ETA: **2015**



A PROCEDURALLY generated dungeon crawling shoot-em-up sounds like a horrible mesh of genres, but you'd be surprised at how well they all travel, hand-in-hand. There's a slew of playable characters that each have their own unique backstories, and as you delve deeper in the gun-dungeons (hence the name Gungeon, right?), the levels will evolve.



THE RAIDER RETURNS

Lara arrived on the games scene in 1996, and lived a productive life as the cartoon action hero she was made to be. But she was reborn in 2013 as a much more serious person: an explorer, a survivor. Rise Of The Tomb Raider takes her back to those core ideals, but this time she's chosen where to be. This time, the control is in her hands…

"We always begin with Lara and her journey," says Rich Briggs, brand director at Crystal Dynamics. "It's the central part of the experience and informs virtually every choice we make." The same was true of the 2013 reboot: young Lara's accidental descent into the Yamatai darkness penned a new chapter for the gutsy spelunker, and one that examined the human behind the idol, the woman behind those iconic guns and swinging ponytail.

"We outlined the adventure and the locations that would support [the experience]," continues Briggs, explaining how the studio wanted to evolve Lara and keep this fledgling trajectory of her character's origin alive and moving. "We looked at the harshest environments on Earth, with the premise that history's secrets are hidden in these remote and dangerous locations. That's why they remain hidden, and that's why it takes someone like Lara to find them."

This isn't the vague Lara of generations gone by, though; she isn't just a face for the player to relate to on-screen. No, Square Enix has been taking cues from genre rivals when it comes to »

making the central character more relatable, more empathic (think *Uncharted*, *The Last Of Us*, think – even – *Assassin's Creed*). Further than that, the studio has been looking to Hollywood survival films (*The Grey*, *The Descent*, *Hanna*, *The Edge*) and deconstructing their characters, assembling Lara's growing confidence with all the most admirable traits of her peers. Writer Rhianna Pratchett has expressed that she doesn't want Lara to just be a vessel for gameplay mechanics to live in – she wants Lara to be a *human*, a hero you care about.

"With *Tomb Raider* in 2013, we rebooted the franchise and took it in a new direction which was intentionally darker and grittier than before," Briggs continues, when we ask him why the decision to take Lara in a more brutal – albeit realistic – direction was made. "The death scenes are not about gratuitous violence. We've created a world that is equally beautiful and hostile, one in which failure has real consequences. We want players to feel a degree of tension as they struggle to survive in these dangerous locations."

doubles down on that promise of survival action that was only ever touched upon in the 2013 game, and owes more to the likes of *The Long Dark* or even *DayZ* than it does to any previous *Tomb Raider.*

"We certainly consider *Rise of the Tomb Raider* to be the evolution of survival action," explains Briggs. "'Woman versus wild' is our vision for delivering this. It speaks to the fact that Lara must survive in some of the harshest places on Earth in order to unlock the secrets hidden within. We also looked to some of history's greatest explorers for inspiration to help capture the spirit of pushing the boundaries of human achievement."

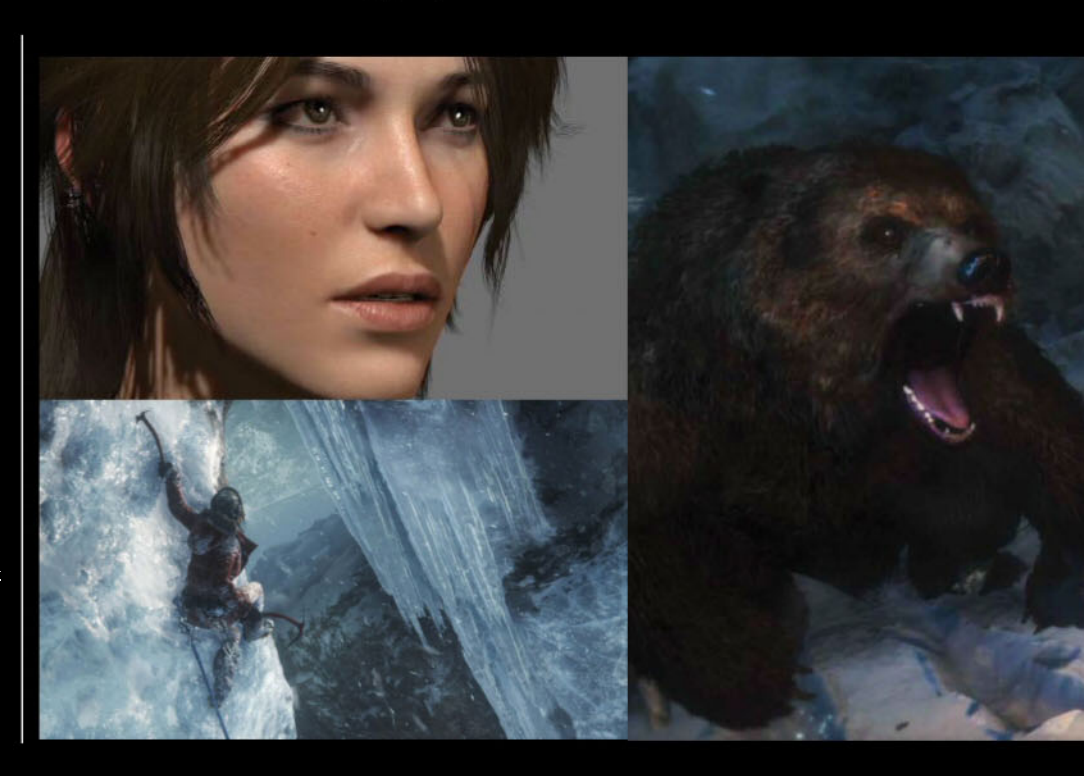
Lara is adaptive, resilient, intelligent (she's an Oxford grad, remember? That doesn't count for nothing). She can use the shifting terrain to her advantage; a blizzard might slow you down on your way to that next promise of shelter, but

"LARA MUST SURVIVE IN SOME OF THE HARSHEST PLACES ON EARTH TO UNLOCK THE SECRETS HIDDEN WITHIN"

● *Just because you start in Siberia, it doesn't mean everything is going to be icy – there are even some rather temperate climes dotted about.*

We can't help but disagree there – the violence and the deaths *were* gratuitous, but therein lay their individuality: the *Uncharted* games punished failure with making you retry an area, that didn't exactly push into new grounds. The *Assassin's* games were forgivingly easy – death would only rear its inconsequential head if you missed a bale of hay or *seriously* misjudged your combat prowess. *Tomb Raider* had a weight to it – a crunchy finality to failure that made you actively avoid dying. There was more than one occasion where we frantically pawed at our pads trying to prevent prowling wolves from tearing our face off.

That violence – gratuitous or not – returns in *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*, reinforcing that beautiful/hostile relationship, as Briggs points out. Thing is, rather than just a savage collection of fauna to fight off, Lara is now tested by something else: the very world she's set out to explore. One of *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*'s biggest upgrades since the prequel is a dynamic weather system that ties in with an in-game day/night cycle: you thought seeking out camp fires when you had the *threat* of an enemy on your tail was bad enough? Well, now try doing the same thing as a blizzard closes in and night draws nearer. It





● *Square Enix and Crystal Dynamics aren't skimping on the tech to bring Lara to life – both the facial motion capture and engine used to craft Lara's hair are cutting edge.*

it can also cover your footsteps and throw any pursuers off your back. There's a whole heap of processing power devoted to snow deformation; when applied to the action it's a game-changer. All enemies and animals leave tracks as well as Lara, so hunting and tracking can be made far easier or much harder, depending on what the weather's deciding to do. It stands to reason that you could lead enemies down a path, hop into a tree and lead them into an ambush, too, if you were canny enough. Lara's most offensive tool here is brains, rather than brawn.

You can use tactics like these to confound your pursuers – particularly, the Trinity organization from the first game, who are back, and *desperately* trying to stop you raiding tombs. They want whatever Kitezh is hiding for themselves, and they're pushing Lara deeper and deeper into the wilderness to find it – hence this renewed survival focus. Any feral animals you find can not only be cooked for meat, but also harvested for their fur – Lara's expensive red parka will only get her so far; the skins of a pack of Siberian Wolves will go even further.

"The crafting system is a great way to offer players more choice, and it also adds more »

LEADING THE PACK

Lara isn't the only adventurer to headline her own game – there are quite a few other upcoming titles featuring a unique, well-designed female lead

Mirror's Edge: Catalyst



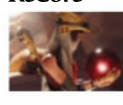
Faith was introduced in 2006's *Mirror's Edge*, and she looks set to continue her kickass campaign in the game's prequel, released next year. If Faith seems familiar it might be because both 2013 Lara and Faith were written by Rhianna Pratchett.

Horizon: Zero Dawn



An RPG set in a post-apocalyptic landscape where you play as Aloy, a hunter who needs to utilise tripwires, explosives, melee and stealth to take down giant robot dinosaurs. Aloy is as resourceful and lethal as they come, and her excellent design reflects this.

ReCore



From the mind of Keiji Inafune comes *ReCore*, a game centred around Joule and her robot dog. The game is being worked on by Armature Studio – the guys that worked on *Metroid Prime 3* – they know how to construct strong characters.

Eitr



In *Eitr* you play as a Norse shield maiden, whose fate was decided for her when trickster god Loki began messing around with the three Fates' loom. The shield maiden's attacks are brutal and sharp, and the game looks stunning.

Beyond Eyes



Where the above protagonists are empowered and in control of their environs, *Beyond Eyes*' Rae is blind and must pay close attention to the world around her in order to find a lost cat. *Beyond Eyes* is a study of vulnerability and the tricks your own mind can play on you.

● *It might seem like a small thing, but by moving from one to two pickaxes, Lara's vertical mobility has drastically increased.*

> **WE DON'T CONSIDER LARA A VICTIM. SHE WAS TRAPPED ON THE ISLAND AGAINST HER WILL. SHE DID WHAT SHE NEEDED TO DO**

» weight to hunting and gathering resources in the environment," Briggs expounds. "Each element that you can collect in the world can be used in the crafting system, and there are 16 in all, including rare resources. You can craft upgrades for your weapons and equipment and even choose which bow to upgrade and use to best suit your play style. There are also custom ammo types such as poison arrows and explosive arrows, both of which require certain resources and can be crafted during combat or while on the move." Considering we mostly played *Far Cry 4* decked out with a bow and a crossbow at our sides, this not only excites us greatly, but it reveals Crystal Dynamics' intent for the world.

If you come across a lot of enemies armed exclusively with guns, with only a bow and some melee weapons at your side, the uber-traditional videogame power fantasy is replaced with something much more intimate and humbling… something much more about *survival*. With Lara's new-found adaptability comes a whole new moveset – her experience deep in the wilds of the Pacific islands trained her for bigger, better things and now she's more predator than prey. As a player, this gives us more mobility – we can nimbly climb trees, hop from branch to branch under cover of darkness, use the towering mountain pines as another route through (and above) enemy installations.

Lara's upgraded her ice pick(s), too – she wields two of them now, allowing for more verticality when it comes to sheer cliff-faces and previously unscalable impasses. Her time back in England has been productive, it seems: Lara can now swim, so expect some of everybody's *favourite* gaming sections to make a return: the underwater levels (you may scoff at that, but you can't deny water levels are and always have been a core part of *Tomb Raider*'s DNA).

Lara's refreshed moveset is mimicked in the way she actually *moves*, too – Crystal Dynamics' own 'Foundation' engine is being put through its paces in *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*: it's seen some new improvements, like the TressFX hair system that's not only being used on Lara's hair (a highlight of the 2013 game), but also on animal furs and Jonah's luxuriant beard.

"We've spent a great deal of time and effort on Lara's performance," explains Briggs. "We always strive to make her feel as human and

AND ALSO…

Lara Croft and her tomb raiding hasn't been confined only to the videogame realm: since 1997, Lara has also been in comics, movies, books and other assorted media…



Comics
- **Starring Lara Croft As The Tomb Raider** (2001)
- **Tomb Raider/Witchblade** (2002)
- **Lara Croft, Tomb Raider** (2003)



Novels
- **LCTR: The Amulet Of Power** (2003)
- **LCTR: The Lost Cult** (2004)
- **LCTR: The Man Of Bronze** (2005)



Films
- **Lara Croft: Tomb Raider** (2001)
- **Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life** (2003)



TV
- **Re/Visioned: Tomb Raider Animated Series** (2007)

relatable as possible, and part of this is her animations and how she behaves in the world. Subtle actions like warming her hands by a fire or wringing out her hair when it's wet lend an extra level of authenticity. The other component is in our tech, which delivers extremely high fidelity in her skin, muscles, clothing, hair and eyes."

Mo-cap techniques have been refined, too, making Lara's movements far more realistic and interactive, responsive to her environment. It's all very *Uncharted*, but that's certainly not a bad thing. In fact, *Tomb Raider* looks like it'll supersede *Uncharted*'s tight animations thanks to new motion-capture tech in use over at Crystal Dynamics. MOVA – a fluorescent paint that's applied to the actor's skin – replaces the old white-ball system, and can give animators over 7000 different points to work from, versus the traditional tech that lets you key in roughly a couple of hundred.

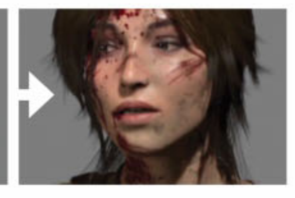
This improved facial animation tech has previously been used in *The Curious Case Of Benjamin Button* and the final pair of *Harry Potter* films… simply put, *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* is sharing graphical tech with blockbuster Hollywood movies. In terms of the final product, it means the animation team at Crystal Dynamics can capture even more of the intricacies and nuances of the human face, making Lara more emphatic to us as players, making her more realistically emotional… we just hope the script lives up to the tech.

To that end, we've got the same voice actress from the 2013 game reprising her role – bringing back the defiant English woman that found »

THE FINE DETAILS

A closer look at how Lara gradually changes through the game





Carrying Scars

Lara brought back quite a lot from Yamatai, including a newfound sense of purpose and courage, but she also picked up a few cuts and bruises. The level of detail in the skin on the new character models is pretty incredible.





Dirt and hurt

Clothing and skin have been getting wet and dirty in games for some time, but Crystal Dynamics has implemented a system that will see Lara's model progressively build up detail, with blood and dirt accumulating on Lara.





Weather effects

As well as grime and gore, the detail on Lara's model extends to snow too. It will also steadily build up and recede on her coat when surviving in the Siberian wastes, adding another small detail that helps to anchor Lara in the world.



● *This is a story of discovery and a race to solve the secrets uncovered on Yamatai. Expect plenty of locations like this.*

her voice in the latter half of the first game. "It's been great working with Camilla Luddington on the performances; she brings such emotion and depth," explains Briggs. "Our team is very experienced now, so we've been able to leverage our learnings from *Tomb Raider*, along with the advancements in our tech that I mentioned earlier to deliver these sequences." From the gameplay we've seen so far, it's clear that Luddington herself is a young actress that's developing and growing *alongside* Lara – there's a parity between actor and character that's only ever going to lace the game with more legitimacy and authenticity.

A strong character like this needs a strong world to bounce off: each locale in-game has its mandatory band of armoured thugs who want to take whatever treasures litter the area to themselves, and to that end, Lara is going to have to go back to her trusty guns. And bows. And icepicks. And daggers. And so on. Quite an arsenal in other words.

There was a kind of mechanical/narrative breaker in the first game, a margin in which we could quite suspend our disbelief: Lara had never killed before, and yet, despite her horror and self-loathing upon first spilling blood, she'd then go on to do it (under your control, you monster) *hundreds* more times, in the name of survival. It's different now, though: Lara isn't trapped in the Siberian mountains against her will, oh no – she's here on purpose, and she's come prepared.

"We don't consider Lara a victim," says Briggs, bluntly. "She was trapped in a desperate situation on the [Yamatai] island against her will. She did what she needed to do in order to survive and to try to save her friends. The key difference in *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* is that Lara is now making a choice to place herself in danger for what she believes is right. [...] This chapter is about Lara's journey to accept her destiny as the Tomb Raider."

What Briggs wants to make abundantly clear though is that this isn't some long road to the Lara Croft of old – in other words, we definitely won't eventually see her back in the mansion, locking butlers in the freezer. Crystal Dynamics views new and old Lara as distinct entities, existing in their own series.

"*Rise Of The Tomb Raider* tells the next chapter in Lara's journey, and it continues with the mature and grounded tone that we established with the reboot. The Lara Croft brand is closer to the character from the classic games, and offers high-spirited nostalgic adventures." So *Lara Croft GO!* and *Temple Of Osiris* is where you'll find the popcorn-movie Lara of old; these new main games are much more concerned with the human behind the name.

So what she needs is a mission. A sense of purpose and perhaps a macguffin or two to chase after – something to compound who she is, something to test her. The Lost City of Kitezh – a rumour of a place nestled in the depths of the Siberian mountains – could be just that.

5 THINGS *You Need To Know About Kitezh, the Russian Atlantis*

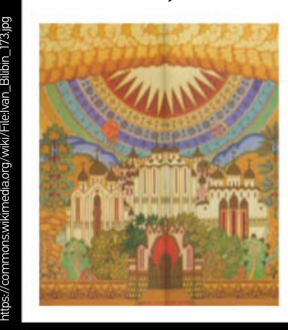
1 The first reference to Kitezh is believed to be in the *Kitezh Chronicle*, an anonymously written book with ties to the 'Old Believers', a Russian Orthodox separatist sect.

2 Maly and Bolshy Kitezh (translated to Little and Big Kitezh) were believed to have been built at the behest of Georgy II, Grand Prince of Vladimir on the Volga River and Lake Svetloyar.

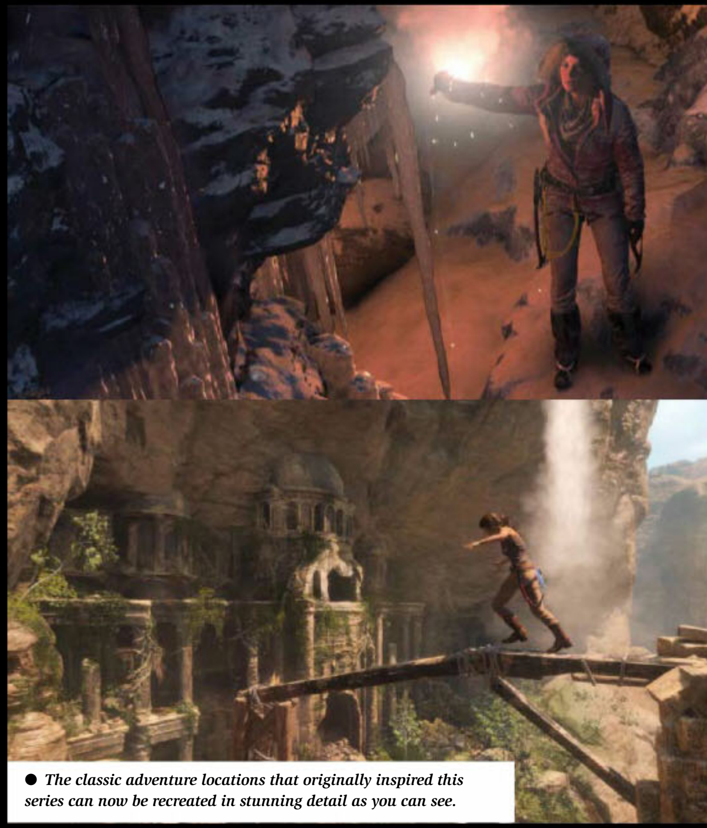
3 Tales say that the towns were attacked by Mongols, only for them to find no fortification and the townspeople praying. Water began emerging from the ground and the town sank into the lake.

4 Werner Herzog made a documentary about the lost city in 1993 called *Bells From The Deep*, presumably inspired by the legend that you can hear bells from the water on a quiet day.

5 The opera The Legend Of The Invisible City Of Kitezh And The Maiden Fevroniya tells a tale of a young common woman who marries a prince only for Kitezh to be attacked by Tatars. She prays for her town to disappear so it can be saved and struggles to find her way back to it after it does exactly that.

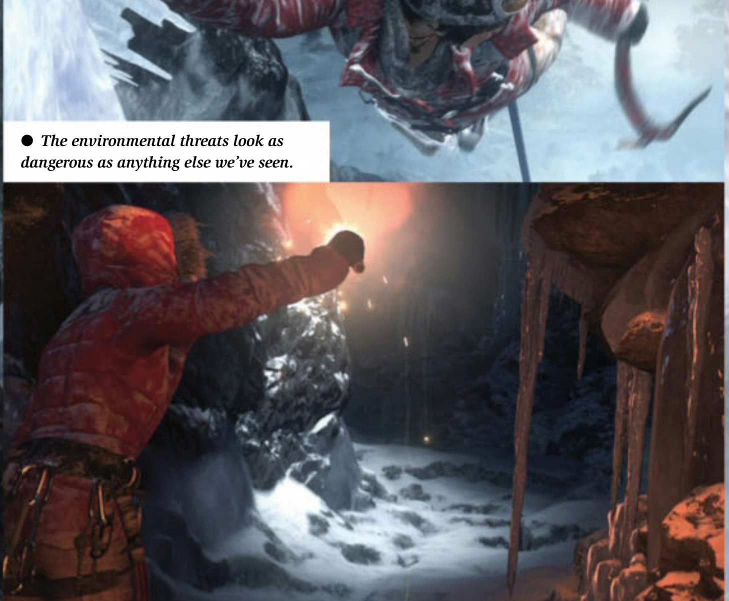

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ivan_Bilibin_173.jpg




The classic adventure locations that originally inspired this series can now be recreated in stunning detail as you can see.



● *Lara's account of Yamatai has been discredited as you begin this game, but don't expect her to allow that to stand in her way.*



● *The environmental threats look as dangerous as anything else we've seen.*

> "THE LOST CITY OF KITEZH WAS AN EXCELLENT FOUNDATION FOR THE STORY"

"We need to make sure the story works within our gameplay and narrative, but we always prefer to have our myths grounded in reality," reveals Briggs. "The Lost City of Kitezh was an excellent foundation for the story because it is a real myth, but it's not as well-known as some. We love to celebrate the fact that Lara is a brilliant archaeologist, she's the one who links the myth of Kitezh to the Deathless Prophet and uses that as the basis for her expedition."

That's the key here, the reason Lara's flung herself so wildly out of her comfort zone. But she isn't going to find this Prophet (and his rumoured access to immortality) propped up on the top of a mountain. No; she's going have to go and actually raid some tombs. This is something Crystal Dynamics has been explicitly working on since the 2013 reboot – a game deceptively scarce of them. The Siberian mountains are rich with legendary tombs and caverns, catacombs and cave networks – *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* is *full* of the eponymous sites.

"This chapter is about Lara's journey to accept her destiny as the Tomb Raider," Briggs explains when we ask about the decision to include more places for Lara to raid. "Lara embodies that sense of discovery and of driving beyond your physical and mental limits." He's right, she does. In a roster of upcoming games that are rather short on female protagonists, Lara stands head and shoulders above her fellow characters, men and women alike. She embodies what it is to struggle, to persevere, to fall, to rise. She embodies survival, not just on remote islands or the sides of mountains, but through a 19-year series of games. It's a lifetime in this business and she's stronger than ever.

EXCLUSIVES SHOWDOWN

This is why Lara's timed exclusivity means so much to Xbox One

	
VOLUME 18 AUGUST	
UNTIL DAWN 25 AUGUST	**GEARS OF WAR: ULTIMATE EDITION** 25 AUGUST
	FORZA MOTORSPORT 6 15 SEPTEMBER
SOMA 22 SEPTEMBER	
UNCHARTED: TNDC 7 OCTOBER	
DISGAEA 5 9 OCTOBER	
	FABLE LEGENDS 16 OCTOBER
	HALO 5: GUARDIANS 27 OCTOBER
	RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER 10 NOVEMBER
PERSONA 5 TBC 2015	**BELOW** TBC 2015
THE TOMORROW CHILDREN TBC 2015	**ELITE: DANGEROUS** TBC 2015

In terms of brand name recognition *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*'s year-long headstart on Xbox One puts its lineup on top for the close of 2015. PS4 has the indie quality, but *Forza*, *Halo*, *Fable* and Lara Croft combined give it a significant edge. Not that PS4 fans will be complaining too much since they'll likely be playing *Fallout 4*, released on the same day.

CAN WE STOP THE HACKERS?

PSN AND XBOX LIVE, AS WELL AS NUMEROUS ONLINE GAMES, HAVE FOUND THEMSELVES THE TARGETS OF CONSISTENT HACK ATTACKS BRINGING SERVICES DOWN. WE ASKED A SECURITY EXPERT WHAT MORE CAN BE DONE

Over Christmas 2014 a hacking attack brought down both PSN and Xbox Live, just as new console owners were looking to take their gifts online. The attack was credited to Lizard Squad. And it wasn't the first or last time either service has been hacked. More and more we're seeing attacks on gaming networks, most commonly through distributed denial of service, blocking up servers and making it hard for players to connect to games. But what are these hackers hoping to achieve, what is being done to stop them and what should we as gamers be doing to protect ourselves?

"To me it's always 'What's the motive?'" says Snoopwall CEO Gary Miliefsky, our guide through the world of hacking, as he gives us a little background on what might motivate attacks on gaming networks. "Now let's go back into Sony's history a little longer. Sony released a CD with the first commercial rootkit for Windows so that they could offer digital rights management to protect their music and videos. Pre-Anonymous, before Anonymous was ever set up, hackers were so upset at Sony for infecting their computers that they vowed to take them down for years to come."

It was a famous case, although perhaps not one very widely known now, but Sony BMG included DRM software on an estimated 22 million CDs, blocking content copying, but also opening up machines to exploitation from other software. After government investigation and class-action lawsuits a partial recall of CDs took place and CD copy protection efforts were abandoned. But what does this have to do with bringing down PSN?

"So, the problem is that Sony wanted to protect their intellectual property, but they did it in a very bad way and that upset the pre-group of Anonymous, it upset the pre-group of Lizard Squad," says Miliefsky.



© Sebastiaan ter Burg

"Who knows how many of them have gravitated to Lizard Squad and are still pissed at Sony?"

Of course 2014 wasn't a great year for Sony hacks in general, with Sony Pictures Entertainment also getting attacked, with private email information and personal data being leaked and a near international crisis developing in the fallout of the exposed data. The hackers who claimed responsibility called for the movie *The Interview* to be cancelled and many speculated about links between the hacker group, the Guardians of Peace, and the North Korean government. Experts still don't seem to agree on whether this was the case or not.

And what about Microsoft's historic relationship with hackers? "So, Microsoft is hated by a lot of hackers and the hacking community. They don't like the operating system, Microsoft is a monopoly to hackers, Microsoft does bad things, Windows is always crashing, so it's 'I hate Microsoft, I'm going to take them down and hurt their network'."

But surely much of this is an age-old prejudice from a different generation of hackers? Are these agendas against Sony and Microsoft just being handed down through the years with little regard for what started the beef in the first place? "Yes, and I've talked to some hackers who told me they hate Sony and

"WE ARE IN A TIME WHERE THE TWO LEADING CONSOLES ARE MANUFACTURED BY THE ENEMIES OF THE HACKING WORLD"

● Many hacker events, like the Swiss Open Cultural Data Hackathon 2015 at the Swiss National Library, are legal and legitimate.

© Swiss National Library, Simon Schmid, Fabian Scherler

they don't even know why they hate them. They just hate them," Miliefsky confirms.

So we find ourselves in a time where the two leading consoles on the market are manufactured by the sworn enemies of the hacking world. At this stage we're beginning to wonder why these attacks weren't more common earlier.

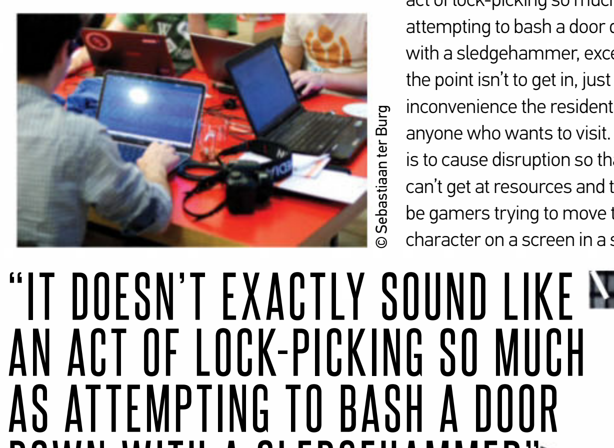
One of the biggest hacker intrusions on a gaming network to date was when PSN was attacked in 2011. Beginning between 17 and 19 April, Sony was forced to shut down the service from 20 April for 23 days. Sony confirmed that the personally identifiable information of its 77 million accounts had been exposed by the attack. Sony was criticised for its delay in warning customers and the seemingly inadequate nature of its encryption of personal data (not including credit card info, which was protected).

With that in mind, it's no wonder we get a little jittery when we hear that both the PlayStation and Xbox networks were under a DDoS attack from hackers in December 2014, bringing both networks down. But what even is a distributed denial of service attack? It starts with computers being infected with malware that allows third parties to remotely send information without the owner's knowledge, creating a network of remote machines, or a botnet. These are often then rented out by the controllers of the malware to hackers looking to launch a DDoS attack. "It allows one person to treat all of our computers as a systolic resource of attack against a target," explains Miliefsky. "Our computers start flooding the internet, but aiming at that one site with tonnes of packets."

And it's happening all the time. In fact you can watch it happen thanks to Norse (map.norsecorp.com), which tracks DDoS attacks live on its site. It's pretty mesmerising to watch. "They've spent ten years secretly putting up honeypots around the globe to eavesdrop on traffic, but not let the attackers know that they're doing it," Miliefsky adds. "Some call it a dark net; you don't see it, but it's there. As a result they're able to collect data in real time from all around the globe to see who the attackers are and who's the victim getting hit. If you see a tonne of packets hitting one server, which you'll usually see in Seattle when Microsoft or the PlayStation network are being hit, you'll just see tonnes of traffic flow from all different places all into that one target.

© Gavin Tapp

● Participants at the Sydney event of GovHack 2014, held at Optiver.



© Sebastiaan ter Burg

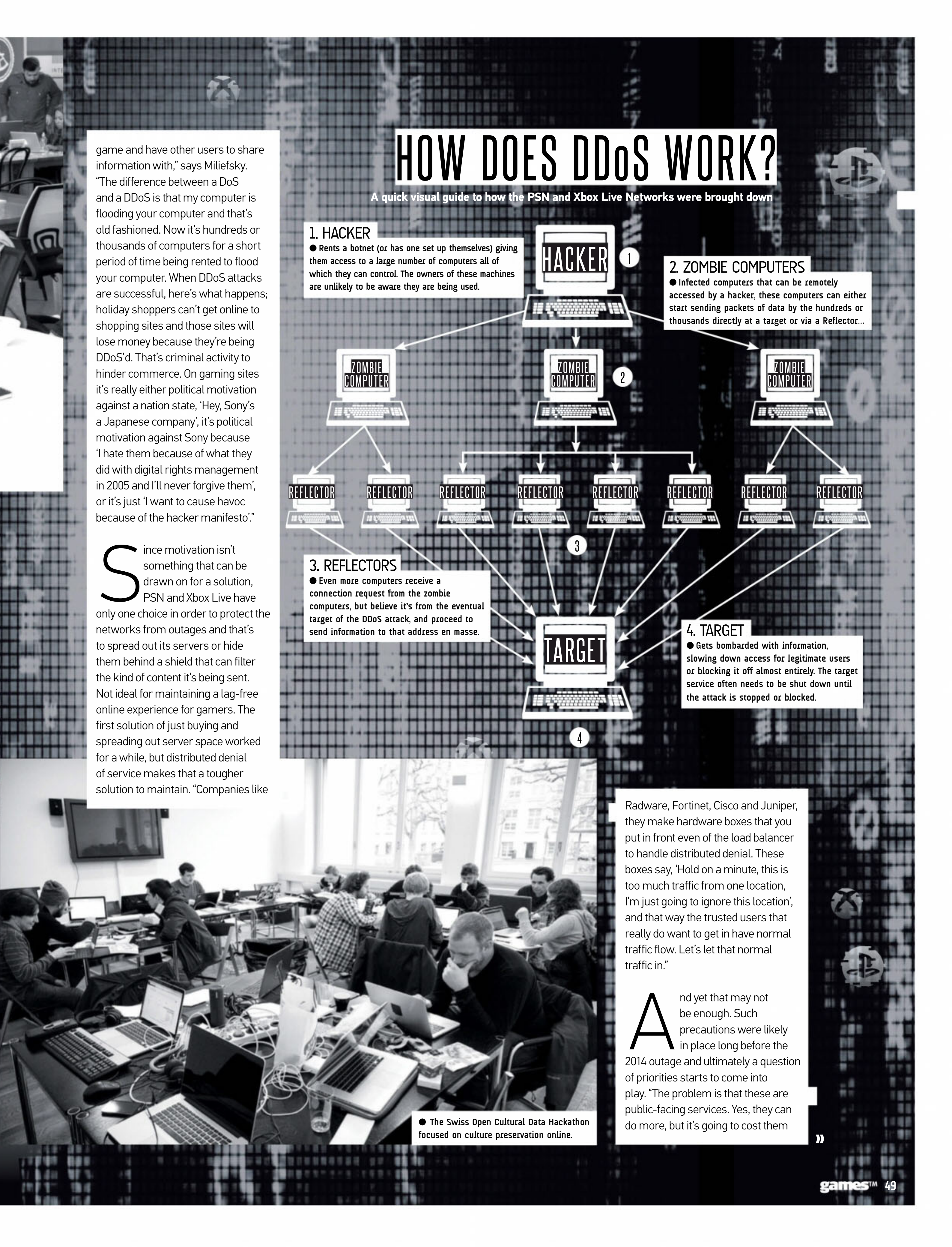
"So a distributed denial of service attack, a DDoS, is lots of infected computers, not knowing they are infected, having a piece of their network capability being rented out over the black market to send too much information to one server, overwhelming that server."

It doesn't exactly sound like an act of lock-picking so much as attempting to bash a door down with a sledgehammer, except the point isn't to get in, just really inconvenience the residents and anyone who wants to visit. "The goal is to cause disruption so that users can't get at resources and this would be gamers trying to move their character on a screen in a shared

"IT DOESN'T EXACTLY SOUND LIKE AN ACT OF LOCK-PICKING SO MUCH AS ATTEMPTING TO BASH A DOOR DOWN WITH A SLEDGEHAMMER"



© Swiss National Library, Simon Schmid, Fabian Scherler



game and have other users to share information with," says Miliefsky. "The difference between a DoS and a DDoS is that my computer is flooding your computer and that's old fashioned. Now it's hundreds or thousands of computers for a short period of time being rented to flood your computer. When DDoS attacks are successful, here's what happens; holiday shoppers can't get online to shopping sites and those sites will lose money because they're being DDoS'd. That's criminal activity to hinder commerce. On gaming sites it's really either political motivation against a nation state, 'Hey, Sony's a Japanese company', it's political motivation against Sony because 'I hate them because of what they did with digital rights management in 2005 and I'll never forgive them', or it's just 'I want to cause havoc because of the hacker manifesto'."

Since motivation isn't something that can be drawn on for a solution, PSN and Xbox Live have only one choice in order to protect the networks from outages and that's to spread out its servers or hide them behind a shield that can filter the kind of content it's being sent. Not ideal for maintaining a lag-free online experience for gamers. The first solution of just buying and spreading out server space worked for a while, but distributed denial of service makes that a tougher solution to maintain. "Companies like Radware, Fortinet, Cisco and Juniper, they make hardware boxes that you put in front even of the load balancer to handle distributed denial. These boxes say, 'Hold on a minute, this is too much traffic from one location, I'm just going to ignore this location', and that way the trusted users that really do want to get in have normal traffic flow. Let's let that normal traffic in."

And yet that may not be enough. Such precautions were likely in place long before the 2014 outage and ultimately a question of priorities starts to come into play. "The problem is that these are public-facing services. Yes, they can do more, but it's going to cost them »

● The Swiss Open Cultural Data Hackathon focused on culture preservation online.


© Sebastiaan ter Burg

● Hackers convene at the Wikimedia Hackathon, held in Amsterdam, Netherlands back in 2013 from 24-26 May.

WHAT CAN GAMERS DO?

You can play a part in the solution to DDoS attacks

Since the power of DDoS attacks emanates from the large numbers of computers infected with malware and used as zombies in sending data to a target, we can play a part in diminishing their effectiveness according to Snoopwall's Gary Miliefsky, but we should also be demanding more of our service providers. "Gamers should harden their own computers, smartphones, and tablets and make sure they're not part of a botnet. That's one thing that gamers should be doing. And maybe if they see these DoS attacks continue, demand more of Microsoft and Sony in return for the loss of a resource. It's like utility right? If the power grid goes down, you don't pay for electricity."

» more money," summarises Miliefsky. "For example, if you can spend $200 a day to cause a disruption of the PlayStation Network, how can they stop it? You might say, 'Why do they need to spend $1 million when I only need to spend $200?', because everybody has an infected computer and they don't know it.

"Even if Microsoft and Sony start to put these servers behind huge clouds that scale and grow and they call it virtualisation, all it takes is doubling down; 'I think I'll just buy another 100,000 computers in my DDoS attack today, maybe that will get them down'. I think it's a never-ending battle, because it's a public facing service."

"EVEN IF MICROSOFT AND SONY START TO PUT THESE SERVERS BEHIND HUGE CLOUDS, ALL IT TAKES IS DOUBLING DOWN"

And frankly, it makes more sense to spend money on protecting particular parts of the service that might lead to legal action if they were compromised. "If you and I have our credit cards stolen, the attorney general in the US will go after Microsoft and blame them, or Sony, and say 'It's your fault that the credit cards were stolen'. And they'll say, 'Well, we didn't do it, it's the criminals who did it'. 'Well, no matter what, you didn't take enough proactive countermeasures to protect the data and it's your fault'."

It's an interesting perspective on the corporate thinking that might be at play, looking to shore up its cover against legal culpability, protecting the element of its customers' relationship that is the most sensitive. That's not to say investment in one area precludes investment in another, but it's understandable if protecting people's banking details and private information was seen as more important than keeping the flow of traffic to PSN and Xbox Live clear.

"If this attack were against the Xbox 360 or One's credit card database, they would do anything against that because they could end up spending $100 million in fines, whereas if they have a DDoS attack 1,000 gamers get mad for a few hours or maybe even a million gamers and only a tenth of a percent pick up the phone and ask for a discount," is Miliefsky's final word on the matter. And so it falls upon us to ask more of our gaming networks and perhaps take care that our own hardware isn't being co-opted into botnets for the next, inevitable attack.


© Magioladitis

● The Wikimedia Hackathon was for developers to hack MediaWiki's own sites and services.



"343 IS DOING EVERYTHING IT CAN TO ENSURE THE GHOSTS OF TMCC's NIGHTMARE LAUNCH ARE EXORCISED"



Halo 5 Guardians

343 Industries looks to atone for recent blunders with Master Chief's latest adventure

There can be little argument that the dominant genre of the last console generation was the FPS. A year and a half into this generation, however, and we've yet to see a new FPS really take centre stage. *Destiny* has perhaps been the most notable, though its MMO/co-op leanings aren't to everyone's tastes, and while *Titanfall* was critically acclaimed at launch, its popularity has dropped with all the velocity of one of its titular mechs.

With *Halo 5: Guardians* set to launch in October, 343 Industries is hopeful that it'll be the studio responsible for the first must-have new-gen FPS, but given its disastrous *Master Chief Collection* launch, in order to achieve this accolade there's a lot of trust to be regained. Fittingly, trust plays a part in the game's storyline, which sees the player controlling two different sets of protagonists through a split narrative. Set eight months after the end of *Halo 4*, Guardians reunites Master Chief with his long-time Spartan-II unit Blue Team: Kelly-087, Linda-058 and Fred-104. Although his fellow Spartans are still operating under the UNSC, they – along with Chief – decide to go AWOL for reasons yet to be revealed, but likely linked to Chief's questioning of his former beliefs.

Meanwhile, Spartan-IV super-soldier Agent Locke (as seen in Ridley Scott's *Halo: Nightfall* live-action series) has »



» been tasked with finding Master Chief. A number of colonies have been unexpectedly attacked, and it's up to Locke – along with his Fireteam Osiris squad Buck, Tanaka and Vale – to find Chief and his Blue Team deserters and find out if they're somehow involved. The player, then, will control both Master Chief and Agent Locke at different points in the campaign, getting to see the story from both sides as both encounter the mysterious Guardians and discover their role in proceedings.

There hasn't been such a distinctly split narrative in a *Halo* game since *Halo 2*, but 343 Industries is adamant it wasn't a driving force in its decision to go down the dual protagonist route. "While *Halo 2* wasn't the direct inspiration for our approach to narrative in *Halo 5: Guardians*, we are aware of some of the parallels between the two games," franchise development director Frank O'Connor tells us. "One of the biggest differences in the storytelling for *Halo 5* is our focus on two opposing teams of Spartans and all of the narrative possibilities that allows for."

Instead, the studio feels that *Halo 3* spin-off *ODST* is a more appropriate spiritual predecessor. "We're telling a sweeping sci-fi action story, but at the same time we want to ground that with more intimate and personal moments," O'Connor explains. "With two heroes and eight playable characters, we have a lot of room to explore the relationships between the different team members and their stories.

"It shares a couple of other aspects with *Halo 3: ODST* too, Nathan Fillion's Buck for one, but also a light hint of detective story, as you'll experience the story through the eyes of Fireteam Osiris as they stalk their prey and investigate his tracks. But in terms of atmosphere, it's less noire, and more classic *Halo* spectacle and scale."

343's decision to give the player two different protagonists who are essentially against each other throws up some interesting challenges, particularly how to handle the potentially jarring narrative shift when changing between characters and their differing roles in the story. The studio believes this potential problem can be solved with use of the game's supporting characters to help smooth the transition.

"I think it's easy to think about Chief and Locke having radically different perspectives, but it's a bit more nuanced than that," O'Connor tells us. "Because this is always co-op, we're able to create a meaningful ensemble approach, and you won't be stuck to one perspective or the other, but rather get to see how the teams' dynamics play out. Buck, for example, views Master Chief very differently than say Locke or Tanaka. Vale is far more sympathetic to Sangheili concerns and politics, and so their conversations – both in cinematics and in the thick of the action – will create a layered view of each other, and the challenges they face."

The addition of a supporting cast also helps make up for the loss of Cortana. In past *Halo* games, Master Chief's AI companion was a useful story-telling tool, conveniently filling in Master Chief (and therefore the player) with background information or key plot points any time it was deemed

Locke and Load

Exploring Agent Locke's additional tool

Although the campaign mode in *Guardians* has players alternating between two different characters (and their supporting fireteams), Agent Locke and Master Chief don't differ too much in how they control. The reason for this is obvious: 343 wants to ensure as smooth a transition between characters as possible.

"We have deliberately maintained a consistent suite of gameplay abilities for all Spartans so that players can shift between each character and team without having to relearn the controls," Holmes tells us. They aren't completely identical, however, because Locke is armed with an extra tool that should make his stages play a little differently to those featuring Master Chief.

"One exception is the new tracking ability that Spartan Locke and his team use as they hunt the Master Chief," Holmes explains. "The Artemis Tracking System is a device developed by the Office of Naval Intelligence and deployed in the field by Fireteam Osiris. It gives players the ability to sweep the environment looking for clues and gameplay opportunities." This new tool has also led to a change in the way 343 has designed its maps, taking things even further away from the corridor-based gameplay early entries in the series were criticised for.

"We've made a point of designing our campaign missions to be much larger and open than previous games, with multiple paths and different gameplay opportunities for players to take advantage of," Holmes says. "The new tracking system highlights these opportunities throughout the environment as well as secondary narrative drops and collectibles."

necessary for the narrative. Having sacrificed herself to save Master Chief in *Halo 4*, however, she won't be around this time; as such, with her gone, it's up to the other Spartans to take on her expository role.

"Having a group of Spartan teammates surrounding our heroes gives us a new opportunity for story-telling and interaction between the characters," adds studio head Josh Holmes. "This helps fill in some of the information that would typically be provided by Cortana in previous games. One of the biggest challenges with writing for an ensemble cast like ours is finding enough time to explore each of the characters without overwhelming the player with dialogue. This is also aided by simple visuals: you'll always know who's talking to you via in-HUD UI elements, and while that's hardly ground-breaking it makes it very easy to form relationships between the player and the characters, as well as handling the expository stuff that Cortana used to."

This provides the cooperative campaign experience with additional replay value."

Solo players may be raising their eyebrows just now, and with good reason: the pain of *Resident Evil 5* and its shoehorned co-op AI still lingers deep in the hearts of many single-player gamers, never to be forgotten. But Holmes is keen to stress that while there are indeed AI teammates in *Guardians*' campaign should you choose to go it alone, the game's Fireteam AI system – which lets you issue commands to the other Spartans on the battlefield – is designed to ensure minimal irritation.

"We want to ensure that fans who play *Halo* solo enjoy *Guardians*' campaign just as much, and adding Fireteam AI was key to bringing that element of dynamic teamwork to their experience as well," he stresses. "Our Fireteam members are capable enough to support you throughout the campaign without getting in the way. If you want

> "Warzone mode may do for Halo what Horde and Zombies did for Gears and COD"

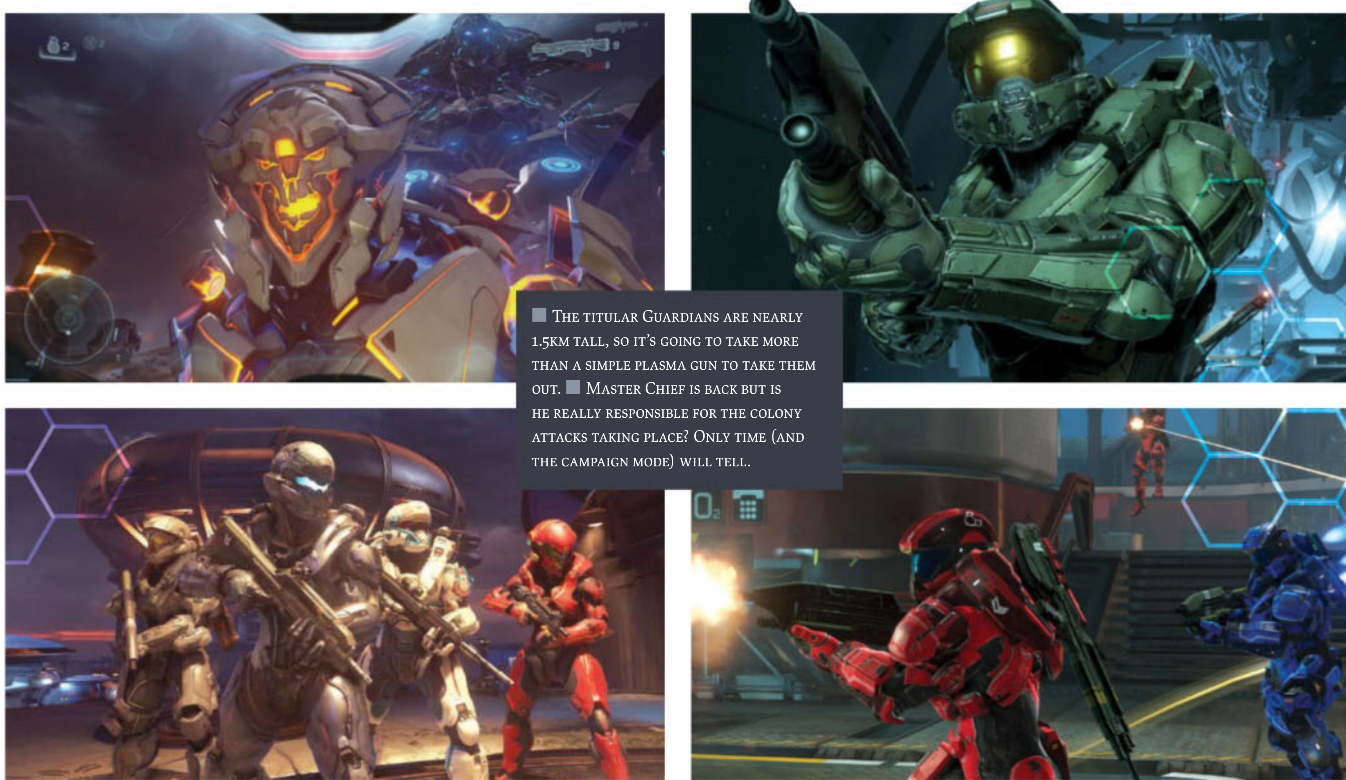
This new emphasis on teammate interaction underlies a general focus on co-operative gameplay, with *Guardians* featuring notably distinct co-op characters for the first time in the series. Indeed, as Holmes confirms, "co-op was a core focus for the game from the very beginning". He adds: "*Halo* has always featured co-operative play but historically players have controlled four identical clones of the Master Chief. With *Guardians*, each player controls a different Spartan with a unique armour design, weapon loadout and HUD design. More importantly, each character brings their own personality and perspective to the story and dialogue so that the play experience is differentiated in subtle ways.

additional control, we have a one-button contextual orders system. With it you can give simple commands to your teammates, ordering them to take a position, fire on your target, use a vehicle or turret and even swap weapons. Orders can make your teammates more effective if used correctly but they are never necessary and players can choose to play through the campaign without them."

Regardless of whether you opt to take on the fight alongside human or artificial friends, you'll be doing so against a range of enemies both familiar and new. Most notable of what's been shown to date are new Promethean enemies, including the new Promethean Soldiers. These »



■ Osiris member Tanaka was one of only three people who survived the 'glassing' attack that destroyed her homeworld.



■ The titular Guardians are nearly 1.5km tall, so it's going to take more than a simple plasma gun to take them out. ■ Master Chief is back but is he really responsible for the colony attacks taking place? Only time (and the campaign mode) will tell.

» are the Promethean equivalent of Spartans and are designed to match your team on the battlefield. Not only can they make use of UNSC and Covenant weapons and vehicles, they can also use short-range teleportation to move quickly around the battlefield. As well as these new Prometheans, Holmes promises 343 has "evolved the abilities of the Prometheans from *Halo 4* to create more interesting and challenging combat encounters".

Though it would be unfairly disparaging to dismiss the campaign as a mere entrée to the multiplayer main course – after all, *Halo* is one of the few FPS series, unlike the likes of *Call Of Duty* and *Battlefield*, with a lore that fans actually care about – it does nevertheless go without saying that *Guardians*' online modes are likely to be the main reason most Xbox One owners will want to buy the game. That enthusiasm will be tempered slightly this time however as, for the first time in its history a *Halo* game finds itself trying to convince players its online multiplayer will be up to snuff.

The problems surrounding *Halo: The Master Chief Collection*'s launch are well documented, with a disastrous implosion of online servers leaving players with connection issues for many months after release. Although these days it's relatively easy to get a smooth match going, the initial problems caused so much bad publicity for the game that – much like Sony's similar issues with *DriveClub* – the pre-release hype was snuffed out, and a lot of disappointed players decided to move on and jump ship to the likes of *Destiny* rather than wait for a fix.

343 needs to nail *Halo 5*'s multiplayer from day one. This is a massive turning point for the series, one that will either get *Halo* back on track and return it to its rightful place on the FPS throne or – should there be issues again – lead to a "fool me once" scenario that will kill any trust that remains within the *Halo* fanbase. Thankfully for 343, the *Halo 5* multiplayer beta which ran for three weeks at the start of the year (even during *The Master Chief Collection*'s woes) has already gone some way to rebuilding fans' confidence in the studio's ability to provide a stable online experience.

"The honest answer [as to why this is] is that *Halo 5: Guardians* and *Halo: The Master Chief Collection* are built on two completely separate code bases and developed by two completely different teams," Holmes explains. "The data they had and the challenges they faced, while immense, are an apples and oranges comparison. It's been great to immerse ourselves as players in the classic games, but in terms of tech, it's just a different animal. There were some platform things we were able to observe, and since the launch of the *Halo: The Master Chief Collection* our teams have shared some data and takeaways that have helped inform matchmaking for *Halo 5: Guardians* at a platform level, to ensure that we will deliver a rock solid multiplayer experience when we release in October."

Assuming we won't get a repeat performance of last year's shambles, then, the other main priority for 343 is delivering a multiplayer mode that offers something different, something more than just a graphically enhanced rehash of previous *Halo* online skirmishes. Warzone is that mode, and from what we've seen of it so far it may just do to the series what Horde and Zombies did for *Gears Of War* and *Call Of Duty* respectively in the past.

Linda-058

Linda Pravdin is an immensely skilled sniper, reportedly able to take out Banshees with one shot by shooting the pilot through a tiny gap on the vehicle's body. She's a bit of a lone wolf and, other than Master Chief, is easily the quietest member of Blue Team. Master Chief once called her the "strongest" Spartan, because she doesn't need help from any other member of the team.



Essentially combining a large team-based online multiplayer mode with single-player elements, Warzone pits two teams of twelve players head-to-head in massive maps populated by AI-controlled Covenant and Promethean enemies in an attempt to score 1000 points first. Players score points by killing not only their opponents, but also the AI-controlled Spartans fighting alongside them and the other enemies dotted around. Alternatively, they can infiltrate their foe's base and destroy the team core located within. The edge can be gained by reaching any of the armouries or garages dotted around the maps, unlocking new weapons and vehicles using the game's new level-based Requisition system.

As entertaining as Warzone seems, however, it's difficult to shake the feeling that many traditional *Halo* players will be happy to stick with the traditional options they're most familiar with: Slayer, Team Slayer, King Of The Hill, what have you. But Holmes is hopeful Warzone will strike a chord with the *Halo* multiplayer community and potentially become the game's most popular online option.

"Ultimately it's just a big, fun mode," he tells us, "however we like to think there's something in here for everyone. We've watched Pro Players take a clinical, surgical approach to combat and objectives, and we've seen casual players revel in the madness and mayhem the full sandbox enables.

FEELING BLUE

GET TO KNOW THE BLUE TEAM BETTER

KELLY-087

Kelly is not only the fastest of the Spartans, she's also the fastest human who ever lived, capable of running at speeds of up to 38mph (by contrast, Usain Bolt can 'only' run 27mph). She's also got a remarkable tolerance for pain and is the Blue Team's wisecracker, often making quips when the team's in a sticky situation.

JOHN-117

Better known as Master Chief, if you've played previous games in the *Halo* series then chances are you already know loads about this particular Spartan. As you join him at the start of *Halo 5*, he's gone AWOL with three of his Blue Team squad members and has begun questioning his beliefs.

FREDERIC-104

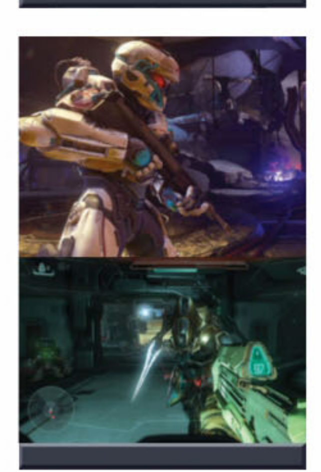
A Lieutenant Spartan-II, Fred is similar to Master Chief in that he's a strong leader and good at thinking on his feet. He sometimes gets too emotionally involved though, taking the responsibility of leading his team too seriously. He's an expert with a combat knife.

> "While there are AI teammates, the Fireteam system is designed to ensure minimal single-player irritation"

There are even things in this mode for RPG fans: there's a great deal of player progress and customisation to be had, but without being so intrusive that it demands a ridiculous investment. You can either commit to the mode fully, or sample at will. Matchmaking and an in-game, per-session levelling system will ensure balanced and fun games for players of every stripe."

Despite the addition of this new mode, 343 is also keen to avoid one of the other issues that plagued *The Master Chief Collection*: fragmentation of the userbase caused by too many different modes and options, thereby making it harder to start a new game. In order to do so it's taking a step that feels radical in this day and age: on top of the 20 or so maps provided with the game, all 15 of its upcoming DLC maps will be free to every player.

"It was [an important decision for us], and it's a hard thing to wrestle down," Holmes tells us. "The games industry and our business model are always moving targets, and decisions that make sense at the start of a production schedule can evolve to be problems by the time you ship. So we wanted to establish a really simple commitment to players: to provide value and to maintain an un-splintered player base. We have plenty of games out there competing with us for players, without competing with ourselves. Making this content is a huge expense and a giant investment of manpower and bandwidth, but we think it's going to be worth it in the end."



It certainly appears – barring some unforeseen launch disaster – that Holmes is correct. So far *Halo 5* looks likely to avoid the embarrassing pratfalls experienced by *TMCC*, and in doing so provide Xbox One owners with their first proper new-gen *Halo* game. It still remains to be seen whether the campaign mode's focus on co-op will alienate solo gamers who had hoped to play through the game alone without being aided by a trio of AI squaddies, and despite 343's best efforts it's impossible to tell these days how stable a game's online component will be immediately following its release. So far, though, the studio is doing everything it can to ensure that the ghosts of last year's nightmare launch are exorcised for good, and that *Halo 5* will be a rocket up the series' tailpipe, rather than the nail in its coffin fans had been fearing just ten months ago.



20 HARDWARE INNOVATIONS THAT REDEFINED GAMING

For decades, advances in hardware have reshaped our gaming lives – sometimes with great fanfare, sometimes going almost unnoticed. Join us for a look back at 20 innovations with legacies that still impact gaming today

The first commercial console



1 ■ **Hardware:** ZX81 ■ **Year:** 1981
■ **Company:** Sinclair Research

The computer that took British homes by storm in the early Eighties did so on account of its price - £49.95 in kit form, £69.95 assembled – and it couldn't have achieved that without some incredibly innovative hardware design. The computer utilised a mere four silicon chips and no moving parts – even the keyboard was a plastic membrane model. The machine also leveraged household items, using your TV in lieu of a monitor and a cassette player for data storage. Not only did the ZX81 produce a generation of bedroom coders that provided the foundation of the British gaming industry, it set the stage for similarly affordable computers throughout the Eighties.

Backwardscompatible gaming

2 ■ **Hardware:** ColecoVision Expansion Module #1
■ **Year:** 1982 ■ **Company:** Coleco

As well as fostering brand loyalty, backwards compatibility can help a new console through the transition between generations. This was something that Coleco recognised when launching its ColecoVision in 1982, and backwards compatibility was provided by way of an expansion module. But Coleco didn't have a previous console to provide the library, so the ColecoVision Expansion Module #1 allowed the ColecoVision to play Atari 2600 games. It was a bold move – not only was Coleco offering compatibility with a competitor's machine, but the new Atari 5200 itself completely lacked backwards compatibility. Atari failed to stop the device through litigation as the 2600 could be replicated without infringing on proprietary technologies. Atari was eventually forced to release the Atari VCS Cartridge Adapter for the 5200. Coleco's device not only proved the value of backwards compatibility, but forced platform holders to better protect their hardware designs from unauthorised cloning.



The chip that saved gaming



3 ■ **Hardware:** NES ■ **Year:** 1985
■ **Company:** Nintendo

Some innovations benefit players; others are designed to aid businesses. Nintendo's greatest innovation with the NES definitely fell into the latter category. The NES features the 10NES lockout chip, an addition to the original Famicom design which gave the company a powerful weapon against unlicensed development and piracy, as well as an effective means of regional lockout.

Hardened importers may baulk at the idea of region-locking as a key innovation in gaming history. However, Nintendo's control over the supply of NES software was one of the key factors which allowed it to prevent the console market from being flooded with low-quality software as it had been prior to the crash of 1983. Without the 10NES, it's unlikely that Nintendo would have regained the trust of North American retailers and consumers.

Ironically, the 10NES would cause as many problems as it solved, as the chip was central to the machine's reliability issues. It ultimately didn't matter, as other platform holders quickly implemented similar lockouts, creating the closed and restrictive console market that has existed to a greater or lesser degree ever since.

Hardware boosting games

4 **Hardware:** NES Game Pak **Year:** 1985 **Company:** Nintendo

The NES wasn't endowed with a great amount of RAM, so cartridges often supplemented it. But the improvements didn't end there – on-board memory management controller chips provided capabilities beyond what the stock NES could achieve. Later, cartridge-based systems allowed for similar capabilities, leading to the likes of the famous SNES Super FX chip and the less famous Sega Virtua Processor.



Controller design

5 **Hardware:** NES controller **Year:** 1985 **Company:** Nintendo

Early consoles had a range of designs, from joysticks to vertically-oriented controllers with over ten buttons. When Nintendo introduced the Famicom in 1983, it came close to standardising console controllers, with two action buttons, two function buttons and the cross-shaped D-pad borrowed from its Game & Watch range. The export NES version further refined the design and competitors caught on – the Atari 7800, Sega Master System, NEC PC Engine and Amstrad GX4000 offered similar pads.



Ergonomic design

6 **Hardware:** Mega Drive controller **Year:** 1988 **Company:** Sega

For some reason, comfort was not much of a concern amongst early console manufacturers, resulting in a wide array of rectangular slabs of plastic. Not so with Sega, which produced an ergonomically respectable pad for the Mega Drive by curving the edges away and extending the grips downwards, beginning the progress towards the two-pronged, grippable designs that are commonplace today.



Feature expansion



7 **Hardware:** Mega Drive cartridges **Year:** 1988 **Company:** Sega

The intensity of the 16-bit war forced Sega and Nintendo to go all-out in search of a competitive edge. In general, Nintendo preferred to leverage the power advantage of the SNES, while Sega relied on innovation and bold marketing. Mega Drive cartridges would eventually allow for both by physically interfacing with other devices. Sega's *Sonic & Knuckles* featured a cartridge slot, allowing it to function both as a stand-alone game and an expansion to back catalogue titles. Sega also approved Codemasters' J-Cart technology, which integrated two additional control ports in the cartridge to allow for four-player gaming without a multi-tap. Ultimately, such innovations proved to be short-lived due to the rise of CD-ROM as the dominant software storage medium, but don't count them out – Nintendo included an infrared interface on *Pokémon HeartGold/SoulSilver* cards, which serves as proof that a comeback is never out of the question.



Portable gaming

8 **Hardware:** Game Boy **Year:** 1989 **Company:** Nintendo

Like the ZX81 earlier, the Game Boy innovated in terms of delivering a specific experience – in this case, gaming on the move. Atari's Lynx was a cutting-edge machine, featuring full colour graphics and advanced features like sprite scaling. Sega's Game Gear would also go down the colour route, with a backlit screen and a greater colour palette than the Mega Drive. Both made Nintendo's machine look comparatively primitive, but both competitors missed the point in a fairly spectacular fashion.

Nintendo's innovation with the Game Boy was to design a power-efficient machine. Four-shade greyscale visuals and a relatively weak CPU might have limited the games, but the most important thing was that people could play them in the first place. With the Game Boy delivering more gameplay time for fewer batteries than either of its competitors, players were happy and business boomed.



Unlock codes



9

Hardware: Game Genie **Year:** 1990
Company: Codemasters

The market for paid cheats has been big business for a long time, and while publishers have regained control of it with DLC unlock codes today, it was once a legally shady practice engaged in by unlicensed developers. Easily the most important cheating device was the Game Genie, developed by Codemasters and manufactured by Galoob, which allowed players to alter code values in NES games. Nintendo was furious about the device and took manufacturer Galoob to court on the grounds that modified games constituted copyright infringement as derivative works. After years of legal wrangling, Galoob won a favourable judgement, opening the floodgates for similar devices including the Gameshark, Action Replay and Xploder.

Shoulder buttons

10

Hardware: SNES controller
Year: 1990 **Company:** Nintendo

With four action buttons in a diamond as well as left and right shoulder buttons, Nintendo's SNES pad set the standard layout for modern controllers. The shoulder buttons in particular were a big step forward, as every console since the video game crash had only had face buttons – and almost every major console since has implemented shoulder buttons.



Analogue control



11

Hardware: N64 Controller **Year:** 1996
Company: Nintendo

There's not a controller on the market today that looks anything like the N64 controller, and yet it had a major impact on controller design. While nobody has adopted the awkward three-pronged shape, the inclusion of an analogue stick as standard finally gained acceptance after two decades of failed experimentation by other companies. The camera controls offered by the C buttons were also widely adopted, though more often in the form of a second analogue stick, as was the rear Z trigger.

However, the biggest innovation was the controller-mounted expansion port, which accepted memory cards and a variety of other peripherals. Some of these, like the microphone and the Rumble Pak, were fairly conventional, but others like the Transfer Pak for Game Boy games were truly unusual. Many controllers have aped this feature since, including the Dreamcast, Xbox and Wii controllers.

Force feedback

12

Hardware: Rumble Pak **Year:** 1997
Company: Nintendo

Force feedback initially seemed like a neat little gimmick in 1997, but it quickly turned into an indispensable feature. Sony quickly integrated the feature into its DualShock controller, Sega released a Dreamcast equivalent, and the vast majority of first-party pads that followed included some form of force feedback. If you doubt the necessity of vibration in gaming controllers today, cast your mind back to the Sixaxis, the rumble-free iteration of the PlayStation controller that accompanied PlayStation 3 consoles at launch. Fan feedback was overwhelmingly negative, forcing Sony to eventually relent and release the DualShock 3. So while rumble is a feature that has become something of a background element of gaming, trust us when we say that controller manufacturers omit it at their peril.



Regional parity



13 ■ **Hardware:** Dreamcast ■ **Year:** 1998
■ **Company:** Sega

While the Dreamcast is well-remembered for being the first console to integrate internet connectivity, it's arguable that it didn't get that right. However, it did herald a major shift in how console manufacturers approached the European market. Prior to the release of the Dreamcast, Europe's PAL TV system meant that most games paled in comparison to Japanese and American NTSC releases, frequently suffering from reduced speed and huge black borders. The Dreamcast could output multiple video standards without the need for modification, and more importantly, the user was given a choice between them; the vast majority of Dreamcast games released in Europe featured 60Hz options. Rival manufacturers immediately followed suit, ending a great divide almost overnight. It's a good job, too – just imagine a world of segregated PAL/NTSC online servers!

DVD playback

14 ■ **Hardware:** PlayStation 2 ■ **Year:** 2000
■ **Company:** Sony

The PlayStation 2 might have had blockbusters like *Grand Theft Auto III*, *Final Fantasy X*, *Gran Turismo 3* and *Metal Gear Solid 2* early in its life, but the truth of the matter is that a non-gaming feature was a bigger draw than any of these titles. Despite being a secondary feature, the machine's ability to play DVDs was a massive selling point, giving Sony a big advantage over the Dreamcast and Gamecube (and though the Xbox supported DVD playback, it required an add-on). Today, a console without media support is practically inconceivable – even Nintendo hardware supports streaming services.



Online ready



15 ■ **Hardware:** Xbox ■ **Year:** 2001
■ **Company:** Microsoft

The Dreamcast might have offered online gameplay, but the Xbox was built for it. At a time when Sony and Nintendo were promoting machines with no online connectivity out of the box, Microsoft's machine was set up for broadband from the word go. More importantly though, the machine had the mass storage to really take advantage of it – not only could the hard disk store patches and downloadable expansions, but downloadable games via the initial version of Xbox Live Arcade. While the Xbox was a distant second to the PlayStation 2, it represented a fantastic technological testing ground for the Xbox 360, which more firmly established Microsoft in the console market. Of course, these days consoles have all of these features by default – not a bad level of influence for a runner-up.

Wireless controller



16 ■ **Hardware:** WaveBird ■ **Year:** 2002
■ **Company:** Nintendo

Did wireless controllers exist before the WaveBird? They certainly did, but they weren't great – radio frequency models tended to be bulky and power-hungry, while infra-red models required direct line of sight to a receiver, meaning that someone walking in front of you could disrupt your game. The WaveBird used radio frequency, but by 2002 the size and power issues had been resolved. Nintendo's delivery of a reliable, economical wireless controller would prove to be influential – the next gen of consoles supported wireless controllers directly as standard, rendering the WaveBird's receiver rather quaint.

Camera-based gaming

17 ■ **Hardware:** EyeToy ■ **Year:** 2003 ■ **Company:** Sony

What is a party game without someone making a total fool of themselves? Not fun, that's what. The EyeToy is the innovation that revolutionised party games, providing a device that used the novelty of being on TV to entice players into bizarre performances. Sandwiched between the *Dancing Stage* fad and *Guitar Hero*'s breakout success, the EyeToy was a versatile tool with a variety of applications. It was a big success for Sony with sales of over 10 million, primarily because it was cheap and received long-term support. It's not surprising that console manufacturers have been playing with cameras ever since. Unfortunately, the technology doesn't yet seem to have reached its full potential, but Microsoft's apparent willingness to abandon Kinect might be the death knell for camera-based motion control. But how many add-ons can claim to have inspired over a decade of experimentation in the first place?



Motion gaming

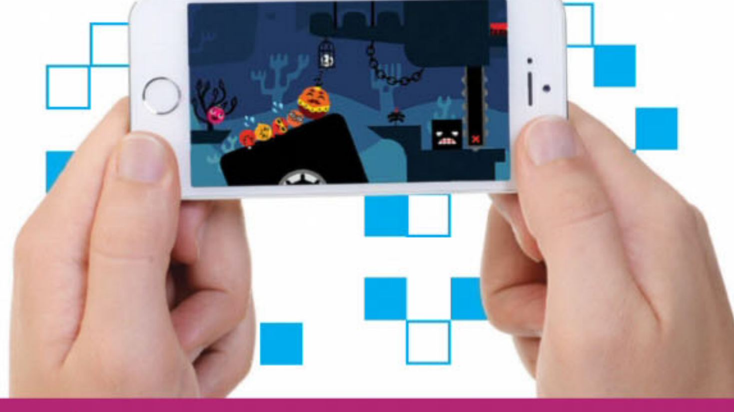
18 ■ **Hardware:** Wii Remote ■ **Year:** 2006 ■ **Company:** Nintendo

The controller for Nintendo's most popular console is a slice of design genius. The Wii Remote has the tactility that camera-based motion control misses, the versatility that regular controllers can't offer, and a familiar shape that doesn't threaten gaming newcomers. It was the envy of competitors – with Sony in particular offering both the Sixaxis and Move controllers as attempts to keep up – and the most unlikely killer app of the decade. While motion control is not tremendously popular amongst the hardcore right now, the design principles that underpin the Wii Remote are seen in the hugely popular mobile market.

Mobile gaming

19 ■ **Hardware:** iPhone ■ **Year:** 2007 ■ **Company:** Apple

The iPhone solved a problem that most people didn't even know they had, by combining powerful gaming capabilities with one of the most widely-carried communication devices of the modern era. With downloadable games for little or no cost and simple, intuitive control schemes, the iPhone avoided all of the pitfalls of Nokia's attempt to combine gaming and mobile phones with the N-Gage. Purists may scoff, but the simple fact is that mobile phones have become an important gaming platform, and without Apple's pioneering device that simply might not have happened at all.



NFC figure expansion

20 ■ **Hardware:** Skylanders figurines ■ **Year:** 2011 ■ **Company:** Activision

Downloadable content is a goldmine for games aimed at adults, who have ready access to credit cards, but much harder to sell to children. *Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure* provided an elegant solution to this by tying content expansion to physical toys containing NFC tags. Not only was the game's retail presence boosted by the addition of figurines, but kids could wander in and pay cash (or convince parents to do so, at least) for a tangible product. The marketplace has become more crowded with the introduction of *Disney Infinity*, *LEGO Dimensions* and Nintendo's amiibo line, but it looks like the craze is here to stay.





THE UNLIKELY RETURN OF

Shenmue

シェンムー

Yu Suzuki speaks exclusively to **games™** *as we look at how his beloved series has returned, the role of the fans, and what we can expect now it's funded*

THERE WERE TEARS shed. People lost their cool on live broadcasts. And fans who had been working for the last three years to bring their beloved Shenmue back from vapourware purgatory felt a sense of relief that the fight was finally over. "It felt like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders after three and a half years of daily grind, trying to conduct the most uphill of all videogame campaigns from cliff tops and office toilets and hospital beds," Team Yu community founder James Hamill tells us. "Yet I'm sure it was only a fraction of the relief felt by Suzuki-san after fourteen long years of 'Where's *Shenmue III*? Are you making *Shenmue III*? When's *Shenmue III* coming out?'."

When *Shenmue III*'s Kickstarter campaign was announced on Sony's E3 press conference stage, it ended a 14-year wait for firm news on a sequel to the Dreamcast and Xbox release. Most had given up on ever seeing Yu Suzuki's tale of a young martial artist seeking revenge for the murder of his father being finished. Yet here it was, alive again after a concerted fan campaign and with the support of Sony to get it off the ground. But as the confetti settled to the ground, celebration has given way to confusion. So, we caught up with Yu Suzuki, co-director Cedric Biscay of Shibuya Productions and James Hamill, one of the leading voices of the #SaveShenmue campaign that made it all possible.

"If there is no noise about *Shenmue* during those past years, nobody cares about this game except hardcore fans," says Biscay, whose company is helping to bring Yu Suzuki's vision to life, working alongside Ys Net on the marketing and promotion of the game.

"You know, I am a very big fan of *Enemy Zero* on Sega Saturn from Kenji »

Eno (RIP my friend) There is no noise about that game, so it might be difficult to make a remake or something… I hope I am wrong."

Once the Kickstarter began, it took just 102 minutes to reach $1 million, a record for a videogame Kickstarter campaign, and reached its $2 million goal in eight hours. For the game's creator, who must have wondered all these years, despite vocal online support, just how committed the fans were, it was a stunning moment. "It was completely unexpected and a big surprise," Suzuki admits. "I became acutely aware of how the fans felt towards *Shenmue* having waited in anticipation these 14 years."

But delight gave way to doubt quickly as the exact nature of the final game

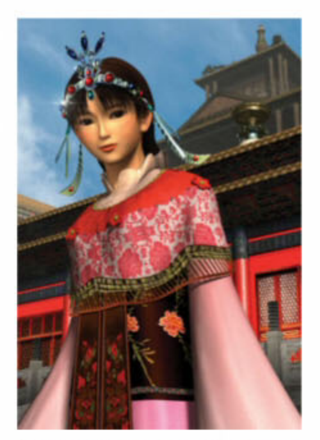


will be made as we go along." What about music and art from the previous games? Would they be reused? "Yes, we are planning to use them." Will arcades comes back? "It will depend on the budget." Will the battle system be similar to Virtua Fighter again? "I would like to see the battle system evolve towards one that matches the world of *Shenmue*."

AFTER TWO YEARS OF NEGOTIATIONS, AND MANY GLASSES OF AMAZING WINE, WE FINALLY DID IT

and the sources of funding began to be questioned. What was Sony putting into the game? Was the money pledged going to partners or to Ys Net itself? On the money side, everything was tackled in a frank release from Yu Suzuki insisting that while additional funding was being sought, the Kickstarter money was going directly to the game and fulfilling pledge rewards. No one else would be profiting from the campaign.

But what of the game itself? Suzuki was good enough to tackle some key issues head on with us. Is the look of the game we've seen so far final? "We are currently in the early development stage, but I am not satisfied with the look of Ryo's face," he reveals. "Improvements





Shenhua appeared at the end of Shenmue II, *having appeared in dreams in the previous game.*

And how many of the team worked on the original? "At least a few of the former members will be on board," Suzuki says.

In fact, Ys Net is being supported on the development side by Neilo Inc. in Japan. This studio was founded by Takeshi Hirai, a system programmer on *Shenmue* and *Shenmue II*. Shibuya Productions is offering promotional support with its expertise in cross-media entertainment and bridging the East/West gap. "I am co producer of *Shenmue III*, which means I am in charge with Yu-san to make it happen, gather partners, and promote," Biscay clarifies for us. "As you know, it took more than 14 years in order to announce *Shenmue III*, Shibuya Productions has an active role concerning that announcement."

Perhaps one of the reasons why there was some concern over Shibuya's role though is that it's a relatively unknown name, but Biscay gave us a little back story on how his company became

Shenmue Facts And Figures

The important numbers from the series and Kickstarter

Kickstarter Budget Breakdown

Kickstarter Fees 8-10%

Rewards 20-25%

Game Development 65-72%

102 minutes to reach $1 million

8 hours to reach $2 million goal

$6,333,295 million made at close of campaign

$47 million: estimated cost of original Shenmue development

Previous Sales

Shenmue **1.2 million** (Dreamcast)

Shenmue 2 **0.5 million** (Xbox & Dreamcast)



- Lucky Hit **4,403** (32.5%)
- GTE Title **2,516** (18.6%)
- Duck Racing **2,201** (16.3%)
- Billiards **1,730** (12.8%)
- Flower, Bird, Wind and Moon **943** (7%)
- Darts **786** (5.8%)
- Arm Wrestling **629** (4.6%)
- Big or Small **157** (1.2%)
- Roll it on Top **157** (1.2%)

Look Who's Back

The returning Shenmue team and what they'll be working on

Yu Suzuki



Director/Producer

The creator of *Shenmue* as well as the producer of such classics as *Virtua Fighter* and *Virtua Cop*, he made his name in the early days on *Space Harrier*, *Out Run* and *After Burner*.

Tak Hirai



Creative Director

Lead programmer on the *Shenmue* series, he has since founded his own studio, Neilo, which is assisting Ys Net with the development of *Shenmue III*. He's one of many former designers returning.

Masahiro Yoshimoto



Scriptwriter

The original scriptwriter on *Shenmue* will be coming back for *Shenmue III*. He's been working on Japanese movies and TV for over 30 years giving him an incredible background in drama.

愛すべき
友をもて





■ *According to Kenji Miyawaki, Shenhua's design started off from a discussion of a character in a new game meeting a girl in Tibet.*



involved. "In 2013, I invited Yu-san to Monaco, and at that time we discussed how we could work together. Step by step, we talked about *Shenmue III* in Tokyo and San Francisco and after two years of negotiations, and many glasses of amazing wine, we finally did it."

More importantly, he's a fan of the series, having played the original games (in Japanese no less) and wants Suzuki's legacy to remain intact. "First of all, it's necessary to respect what *Shenmue* is, and that's why Yu-san is the only one in this world able to lead that project," Biscay insists to us. "For example, if someone else had to lead this project, I would not be interested to be involved. We care about and respect the fans' expectations, and we also have to fit the market in order to get new players."



After 14 years, expectations are high. We asked Hamill what it is about the series so far that has helped it build such a devoted legion of fans. "I've seen the personal connection that people have



with this game, the way it's changed lives and shaped people's thoughts and behaviours," he tells us. "It's become cliché to say it, but it's more than a game; it's an experience. Of course it has its quirks, its idiosyncrasies. What some will find immersive and charming, others will find boring and twee. But for those who invest in the rich, esoteric universe of *Shenmue*, the returns are incalculable. The fire in the hearts of so many fans fourteen years after the latest chapter is testament to that."

We wanted to ask Yu Suzuki about the hiatus and the long wait for this sequel, but he didn't want to get into the particulars of things with Sega. However, he was clear on a couple of key points: "No, production did not get started previously," he says. But was there ever a discussion at Sega about making a sequel? "As to whether there were or were not any plans, I would guess not."

Even the #SaveShenmue campaign appeared to fall on deaf ears at Sega, despite organised and consistent attempts to get its attention. "Over three years of Tweetathons bombarding Sega with pleas for *Shenmue*'s revival drew no response at all from their social media team, besides apparent shutdown on the third of the month. But that was expected," says Hamill. "One of my initial hopes for the campaign was to generate so much attention, from both the public and the media, that people higher up at Sega would have to answer for these public displays of ignorance towards their customers. Of course I wasn't counting on Sega working twice as hard as we were to jeopardise their own image in other ways."

14 years is a lot of time to build up some resentment, but while Sega wasn't paying much attention, the rest of the world was. Hamill gave us a little background on how the unifying voice of the fans, #SaveShenmue, came about and became a social media phenomenon. "In March 2012 we launched the Shenmue Tweetathon, which would last all day on the third of every month. Whereas a petition can be looked at once and forgotten about, the Tweetathon became a way to bring our message back to the forefront on a routine basis," he explains.

"The hashtag back then was #GiveYuTheShenmueLicense, an attempt to accentuate the distinction between Suzuki's desire to continue the series and Sega's reluctance to commit »

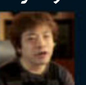
Kenji Miyawaki



MAIN CHARACTER DESIGNER

■ SINCE HIS DAYS DESIGNING THE HEROES AND VILLAINS OF *SHENMUE* WITH SEGA, MIYAWAKI HAS GONE INTO THE WORLD OF ANIME DESIGN, BUT HE'S COMING BACK TO WORK ON ONE OF HIS MOST BELOVED GAMES.

Ryuji Iuchi



MUSICIAN

■ AS THE COMPOSER OF *SHENHUA'S THEME* AS WELL AS A NUMBER OF OTHER SONGS FROM *SHENMUE* AND *SHENMUE II*, THE RETURN OF IUCHI IS CRUCIAL FOR THE HEART OF THE GAME TO REMAIN CONSISTENT.

Manabu Takimoto



ARCHITECT

■ IT WAS AN INSPIRED MOVE TO HIRE TAKIMOTO TO DESIGN BUILDINGS IN THE ORIGINAL *SHENMUE*, SINCE HE IS IN FACT A QUALIFIED AND WORKING ARCHITECT IN THE REAL WORLD, ADDING REALISM TO THE PROJECT.

Masaya Matsukaze



VOICE ACTOR

■ THE ORIGINAL JAPANESE VOICE ACTOR FOR *SHENMUE*'S HERO RYO, MATSUKAZE WASN'T ATTACHED WHEN THE GAME WAS FIRST REVEALED, HOWEVER HE IS NOW. COREY MARSHALL, THE ENGLISH VOICE ACTOR IS ALSO BACK.



» financially. I think it helped us change perceptions about their respective roles and build a more focused following behind Suzuki, the man who sought to enact change in the status quo.

"But while it got our foot in the door of the public consciousness, with even the esteemed **games™** tweeting their support [take a look: **bit.ly/gtmshenmue**], the growth of the campaign and our increased courting of the likes of Sony to lend a hand meant that sooner or later we would have to simplify the hashtag into something more catchy and diverse, and so in January 2014 it became #SaveShenmue."



■ *Nozomi Harasaki, Ryo's childhood friend, moved to Canada at the end of* Shenmue*. It is unknown if she will return.*



What has emerged is an understanding that *Shenmue*'s return was always going to be conditional on it remaining true to its original identity. As the Kickstarter campaign and its stretch goals have shown, the base game Yu Suzuki wants to create remains staunchly in line with what he has created before. It's been planned in a modular fashion, allowing for the game to progress with or without certain features if the funding didn't reach the fullest amount. As it stands, the Rapport System that will reflect Ryo's relationship with Shenhua depending on your conversation choices and behaviour will be added. Similarly, a Skill Tree System has been funded, allowing for greater customisation of abilities beyond



picking up scrolls, which we understand will return from the previous games.

An area named Baisha Village has also been funded, with Suzuki promising a fascinating new element to the story and a massive battle event, inspired by classic warring kingdoms tales. The watercolour painting-inspired Choubu area was not funded by the end of the campaign and neither was the Bailu Village, an area from the close of *Shenmue II*, although Suzuki has not ruled out a continued drive for funding

SUZUKI DESERVES ALL THE RESPECT IN THE WORLD FOR STAYING TRUE TO HIS VISION



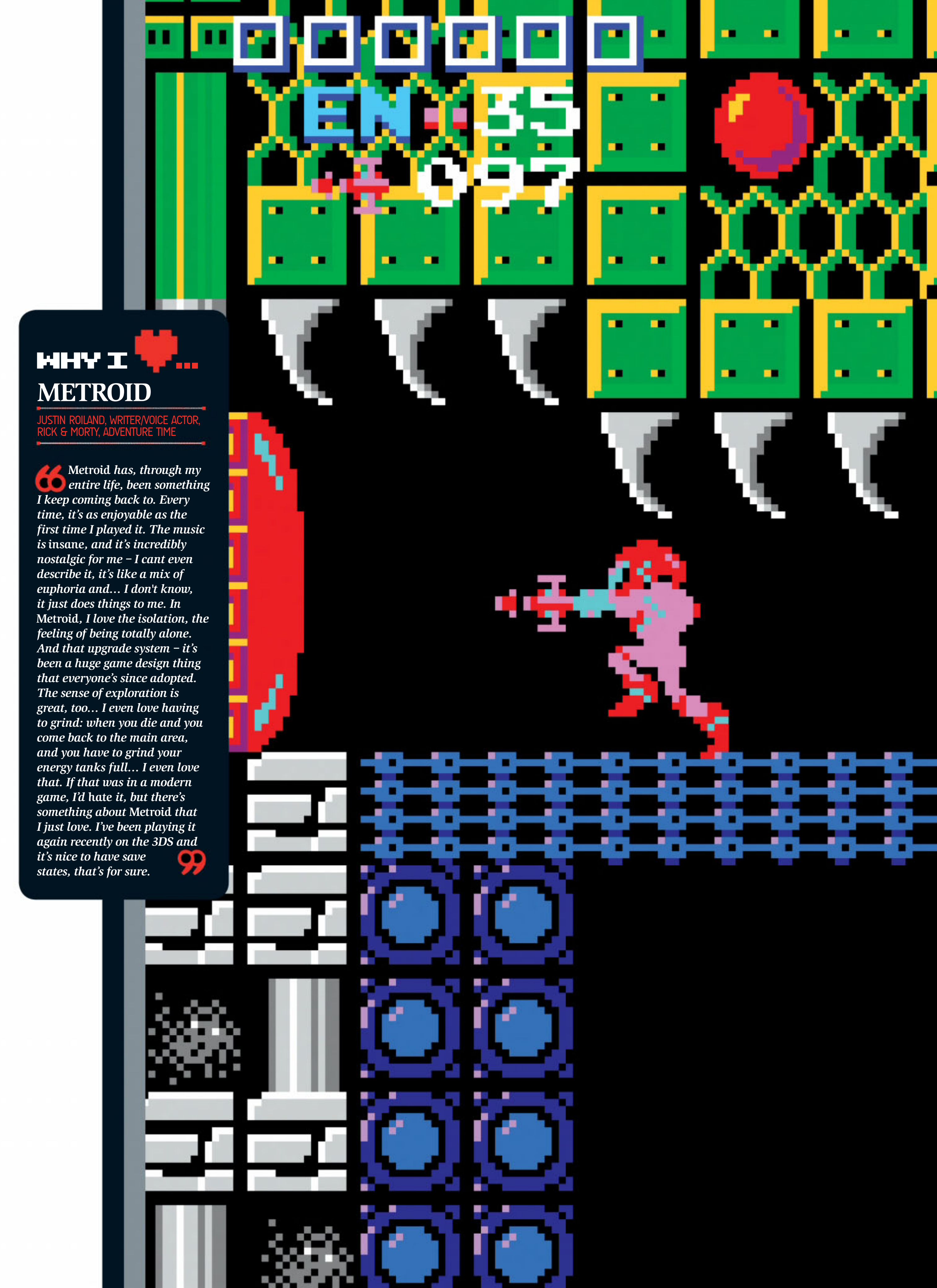
■ *While the game is far from finished, you can already see the progress.*

through Paypal between now and a proposed December 2017 release, much as *Star Citizen* has done since it closed its Kickstarter campaign.

As we understand it, these modular elements would have expanded and embellished the tale Yu Suzuki has had planned since the original *Shenmue* in 1999 and if they don't make the game, nothing will be lost that would be detrimental to that plan. "The original story has not changed," he insists. "I am continually thinking how to turn that story into a game." And Suzuki doesn't seem content to only make *Shenmue III*. His original dream was for more games and he refuses to give up on it. "The initial story line contains 11 chapters. I thought about condensing the story in three, but I thought that would necessitate cutting too much story, so I decided not to go that route. Many fans really want to see the whole story."

While the funding campaign has felt a little muddled at times and the structure a little unusual, Hamill seems content to let *Shenmue III* rest in the hands of the man who made it, since that was all anyone had really been fighting for from the start. "I want to see the game that Suzuki wants to make," he says, likely in agreement with most long-time fans of the series. "Whatever that happens to be, it's the right direction. His commitment to delivering the full story instead of cutting it down to one last game is the gutsiest move a designer in his position could make, and he deserves all the respect in the world for staying true to his vision. I trust that he'll do both himself and the fans – all of whom are now his fans – proud."

"He always brings innovation in his games," summarises Biscay on Yu Suzuki's approach and the chance for game-changing new ideas in *Shenmue III*. "Depending on the final budget we have, he will be able to innovate once again. One thing I can say is our way of making that game is very innovative already. The way we've gathered partners, the Kickstarter campaign, etc. We are totally away from what would be considered standard and I really love it."

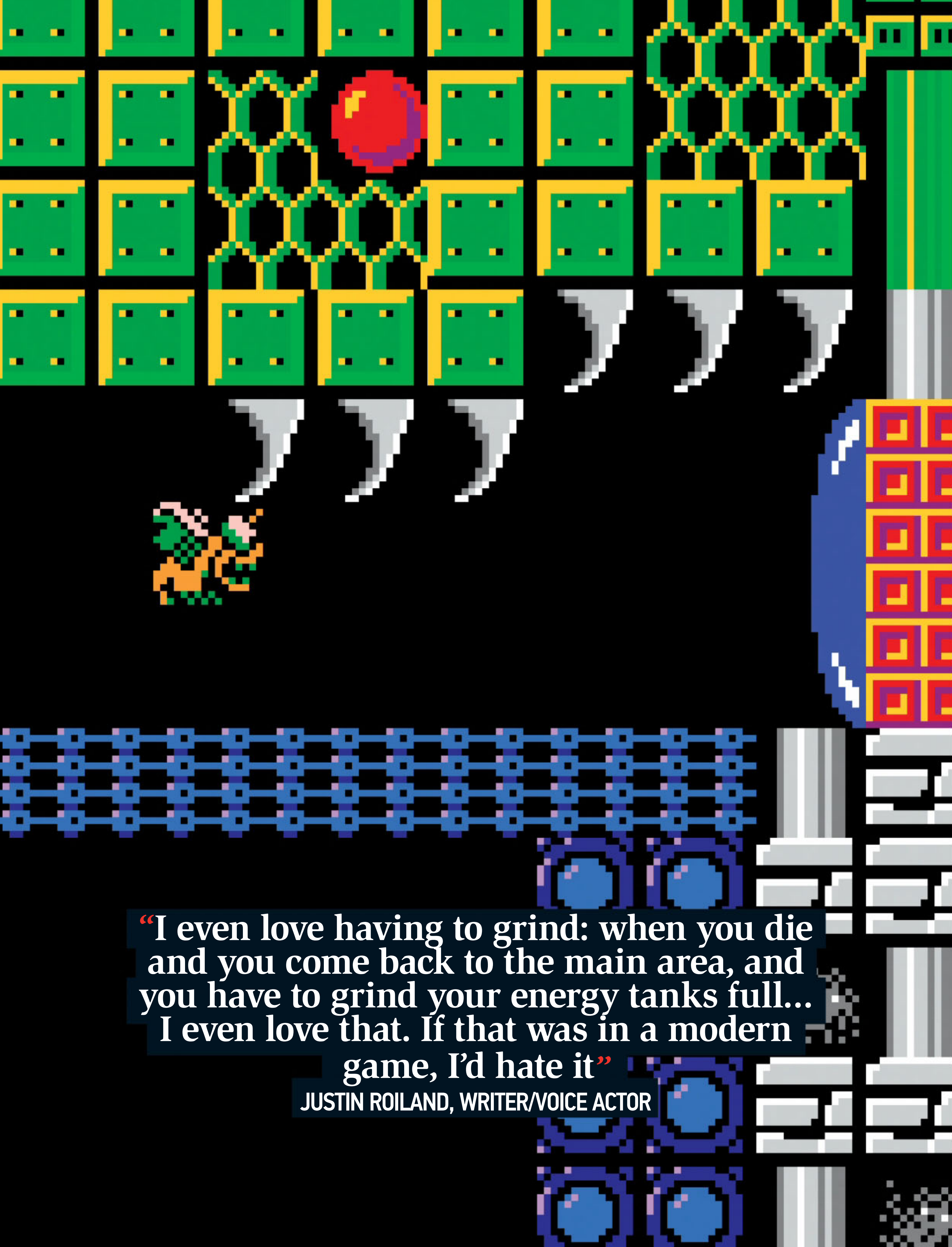


WHY I ♥...

METROID

JUSTIN ROILAND, WRITER/VOICE ACTOR, RICK & MORTY, ADVENTURE TIME

“Metroid *has, through my entire life, been something I keep coming back to. Every time, it’s as enjoyable as the first time I played it. The music is* insane, *and it’s incredibly nostalgic for me – I cant even describe it, it’s like a mix of euphoria and… I don't know, it just does things to me. In* Metroid, *I love the isolation, the feeling of being totally alone. And that upgrade system – it’s been a huge game design thing that everyone’s since adopted. The sense of exploration is great, too… I even love having to grind: when you die and you come back to the main area, and you have to grind your energy tanks full… I even love that. If that was in a modern game, I’d* hate *it, but there’s something about* Metroid *that I just love. I’ve been playing it again recently on the 3DS and it’s nice to have save states, that’s for sure.*”



> "I even love having to grind: when you die and you come back to the main area, and you have to grind your energy tanks full… I even love that. If that was in a modern game, I'd hate it"

JUSTIN ROILAND, WRITER/VOICE ACTOR

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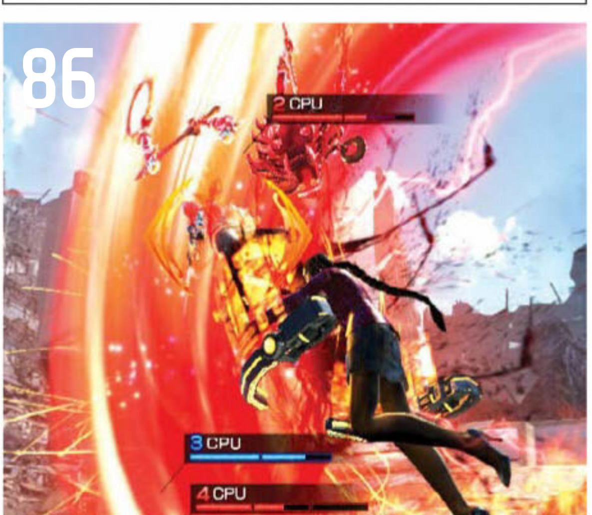




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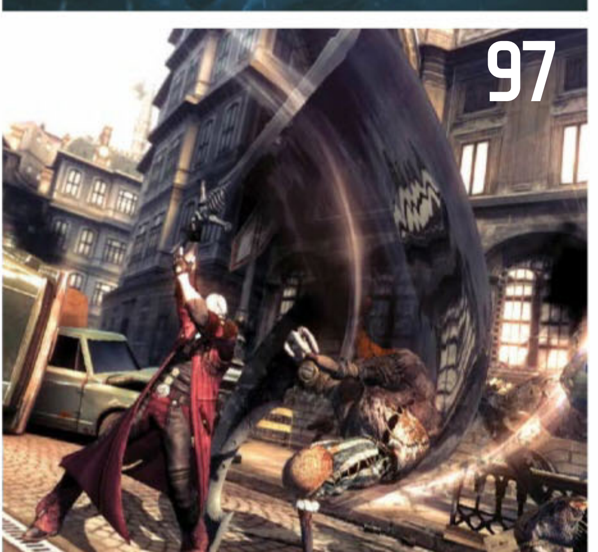












AGREE/DISAGREE?

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Above: Combat will be subtly different for fans of the series, with many enemies utilising area of effect abilities that can be evaded, blocked or countered. Every class has the same skillset, so regardless of how you choose to play you'll still need to master these options.

ONCE MORE UNTO THE BREACH

The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited

Just how much can adding a subtitle to a game make it new? Well, if you've continued to play *Elder Scrolls Online* after its launch last year then you'd have to admit that sticking 'Tamriel Unlimited' on the end hasn't come with all that much, besides scrapping the monthly subscription fee, that is.

You see, the console release – despite its grandiose name – is much the same as the original *TESO*, just with all the numerous patches, improvements and additions that have come along since its initially messy launch. In a way, it's beneficial that the game has had that time to properly set before hitting the console market, a crowd with typically less patience than PC gamers – it means that PS4 or Xbox One owners can experience *TESO* with minimal fuss and bother and in a way that *feels* more akin to the series they will recognise.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Bethesda
DEVELOPER: ZeniMax Online Studios
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: Massively Multiplayer
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Changes to elements such as combat, for example, will be hugely appreciated here. Where originally *TESO* maintained a more typical MMO form of combat – which is to say a sort of skewed automated targeting – a lot of that has been fine-tuned so it doesn't feel quite as controlled and much more direct. There are some subtle differences from the typical *Elder Scrolls* combat, of course, presented in a fashion that makes tougher battles much more about your own positioning and ability control rather than simply wailing on an enemy until they're dead. The newly added reputation system – which allows players to steal and murder – is a welcome addition. Console players will be unknowingly glad of its inclusion, even if it is initially an unexpected burden for newcomers (you can disable the feature in the options menu). As a game it's clear that *TESO* is now as well-rounded and enjoyable as it needs to be for console players; because in truth it might not have appealed had the original PC launch been released simultaneously for the current generation too.

NOT ALL CONSOLE GAMERS WILL BE KEEN TO HAVE MULTIPLAYER STUFFED INTO THE TESO EXPERIENCE

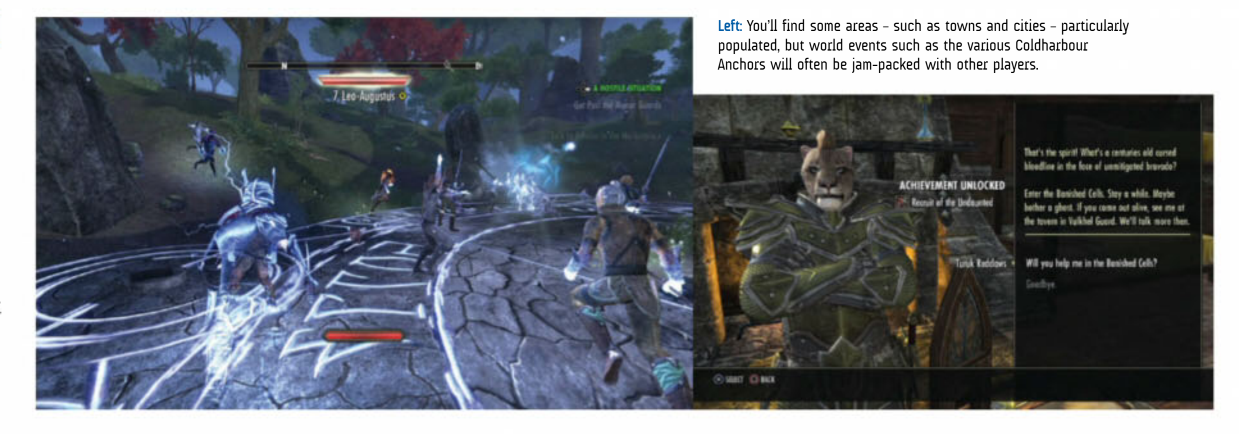
And for what it's worth, *Tamriel Unlimited* offers up a typically *Elder Scrolls* experience to those that are looking for it. It doesn't have quite the same depth of quality in the characters you meet, the quests you undertake or the places you see, but it still plays undoubtedly like an *Elder Scrolls* game. In fact it's sensibly tailored to an extremely solo form of play. The main questline will

FAQs

Q. SHOULD IT HAVE BEEN DELAYED?
No. A lot of the improvements here are based on feedback from the players that it wouldn't have had by delaying *TESO*.

Q. REPETITIVE CONTENT?
Actually no. It's not got the same quality as other *Elder Scrolls* games, but its quests offer a great deal of variety.

Q. MORE CONTENT COMING?
Yes. The first year of *TESO* was spent fixing and improving; now comes the new content, such as the Imperial Palace and the Dark Brotherhood.



Left: You'll find some areas – such as towns and cities – particularly populated, but world events such as the various Coldharbour Anchors will often be jam-packed with other players.



Below: The game isn't all that impressive, and it's hard to understand why – many zones and areas are locked behind loading screens, and phasing means there's never an abundance of other players.

rarely task you with grouping up, with plenty of solo-only dungeons and open world events to hunt down alone at your own leisure.

The plethora of players romping about the wilderness barely impacts on your experience, except for the mere fact that they're there; experience and loot is shared among participants, even if you haven't grouped up – so there's no sense of clamouring for a limited resource. Voice chat has been implemented too – for the console crowd – a vicinity-based system that means players can quickly communicate without the need for emotes or arduous messages. It makes group requests quicker, easier and more personal – though in truth it is rarely used for such a fashion.

What this all means, however, is that the 'Online' part of the game is something you can ease yourself into; something that traditionally console-based *Elder Scrolls* fans will appreciate. Here you can dip your toe into the social aspect at your own leisure – if at all – without any concerns of sullying the game for yourself. Maybe you'll jump headfirst into partying up, maybe you'll come across a harder group dungeon within the world and fancy taking it on straight away or maybe you'll leave it until the PvP zone at endgame as a means of extending your playtime within this online Tamriel. Either way, the choice is yours and that should be commended; not all console gamers will be keen to have multiplayer stuffed into their *Elder Scrolls* experience, after all.

There are some issues you may want to bear in mind, of course. For one, it's not a visual treat – and that's putting it mildly. *Skyrim* looks better than *TESO*, and while that didn't have the added concern of multiplayer to worry about it'll still be a concern for many a new-gen console gamer coming off the back of *The Witcher III* and *Batman: Arkham Knight*. It does feel like something of a *Skyrim*-lite, too; while there's plenty of content to work through, very little of it can be considered of importance. True, this is a criticism that can be levelled at any of the *Elder Scrolls* series, but it's the fashion in which they're presented that is an issue. A couple of lines of dialogue can often be all you're given before being plunged into whatever mundane task is expected of you; rare are the significant characters and even rarer are the ones you care about. It just doesn't maintain the same depth of exploration or profundity that the series is known for, leading to a much quicker-paced *Elder Scrolls* experience.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

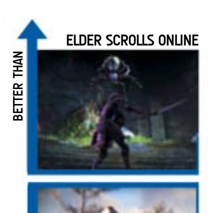
ONCE MORE WITH FEELING: Though the core game remains the same, so many of the improvements already made to the PC version means *Tamriel Unlimited* make this a much more robust title.

Despite all that, though, it is *still* an *Elder Scrolls* experience, and that alone will be enough to convince players hankering for a bit more ahead of the next Bethesda title – especially since it does share so many similarities with *Skyrim*. Though *Elder Scrolls Online* was by no means a failure when it originally launched, Zenimax Online Studios has still managed to improve on the core foundation that was already there giving newcomers on console and PC alike the biggest opportunity to delve into Tamriel unhindered. New content is already on the way, too, so if ever there was a time to reconsider your stance on *Elder Scrolls Online*, now might be that time.

ALL FOR ONE

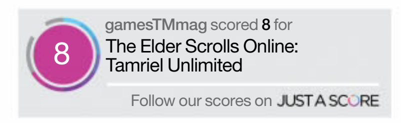
As with *Destiny* before it, *Elder Scrolls Online* kind of banks its hopes on the metagame that is so prevalent at the end of so many MMOs. Gear-grinding and PvP act as a large part of the (current) final parts of *TESO*, with the entire region of Cyrodiil acting as a PvP zone that the three factions of the game all vie for. By the time you're truly ready for this area, however, the game will have likely consumed a good portion of your life already. And, as with *Destiny*, the more time you devote to metagaming the more it consumes your entire life.

BETTER THAN — ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE



AS GOOD AS — DESTINY

VERDICT
ONLINE OR NOT, IT'S THE TASTE OF ELDER SCROLLS YOU'RE AFTER



TO SAY IT'S OVERLY FAMILIAR IS LIKE SAYING VELOCIRAPTORS ARE A BIT GRUMPY

FOUR PLAY

Despite only referring to the latest movie, *LEGO Jurassic World* actually runs through all four cinematic episodes, picking out key scenes from the movies and recreating them in classic Traveller's Tales fashion. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the first and most recent movies get the best treatment, and are the only ones that are unlocked from the get go. It's great to run though the classic moments, although the choice to feed in real soundbites from the movies is an odd one – they appear at wildly different levels in the mix, meaning the game sometimes sounds like a cheap YouTube parody. It's at odds to the rest of the production, which is typically lavish and seamless.



Right: Don't worry about playing *LEGO Jurassic World* with children – the game happily avoids any of the movies' truly scary moments with a sly wink and a gag. It's also a less complicated game than some of the recent efforts – fewer characters and less confusing puzzles.

EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTOR

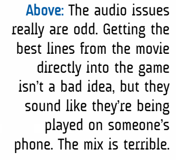
LEGO Jurassic World

DETAILS
FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, Xbox 360, PS3, Wii U, PC, 3DS, Vita
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros
DEVELOPER: Traveller's Tales
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

The days of wretched licensed movie games are over, and it's thanks to the marvellous LEGO franchise. The bar has been set so high by the likes of *LEGO Marvel Super Heroes* and *LEGO Lord Of The Rings* that sludge like the *Pacific Rim* game just aren't acceptable any more. In raising that bar, though, Traveller's Tales has also given itself a challenge. How can it translate less mechanically interesting properties than *Star Wars* and superheroes to its tried-and-tested formula? Well if *LEGO Jurassic World* is anything to go by, then it's by sticking to that very formula vehemently and never deviating. While dinosaurs roam the earth, you'll still be walking up to objects, shrugging, switching characters, and building little LEGO models.

While *LEGO Jurassic World*'s cast of characters may not be able to leap tall buildings or battle Balrogs, they do exist in a sumptuous world. Despite the name, Traveller's Tales has actually recreated all four films, picking out the best scenes and turning them into shiny plastic playsets. Given the tropical setting, the backgrounds are lush and verdant, mixing chunky blocks with more realistic vegetation for an effective look. From the offset, you can pick to play through the original Spielberg classic, or battle through the Pratt-powered blockbuster. Beat these, and you can play through *The Lost World* and *Jurassic Park 3*, although neither are as good as the two 'main' movies, which isn't exactly surprising.


Above: This is probably the most visually impressive *LEGO* game to date. The animation on the dinosaurs belies their blocky frames, while the backgrounds are almost photorealistic at times. Traveller's Tales has evolved nicely into the current console generation.



The studio's vast experience in turning major movie scenes into playable levels is very much evident here, too. It's particularly strong when playing through the first film, as the comic recreation of such iconic scenes is as joyous here as it was in the original *LEGO Star Wars*. And don't worry if you're playing alongside young children – Traveller's Tales tends to replace scenes of death and dismemberment with a well-placed sausage gag. It's a running joke that doesn't get old.

Take the famous T-Rex reveal from the first film. Traveller's Tales takes the key points – escaping the overturned trucks, running away from the dinosaur, and then climbing the giant tree, as gameplay devices, while eliminating a lot of the unnecessary transitions that wouldn't suit its simple gameplay systems. It's surprisingly elegant and effective.

Other LEGO games have struggled in maintaining a sense of pace during actions scenes. *LEGO Marvel Super Heroes* is particularly guilty of this. The music is pounding, the sense of urgency immense, but the actual task at hand is a slow, multi-part puzzle. It creates a bit of a disconnect when everything is telling you to hurry up, but the game is forcing you to slow down and do it right.

LEGO Jurassic Park doesn't have quite the same ambition; it's happy to let the quick scenes be just that: quick. If you're supposed to be running away from dinosaurs, that's exactly what you'll be doing, running. The movies have enough light and shade that the puzzle sections are allowed to breathe. It's especially welcome when playing with a young child, too, as pounding music isn't a great soundtrack when you're trying to explain the difference between left and right.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WRITER'S BLOCK: It's definitely time for a few new gameplay ideas in the LEGO games. *LEGO Jurassic World* improves on the pacing issues of some of its predecessors, but the gameplay is nearly identical.

Occasionally, you do actually get to play the part of the dinos themselves. Fancy smashing through some barriers as a triceratops? Well you've come to the right place. Traveller's Tales isn't averse to taking a few narrative liberties in order to serve gameplay, but if anything, these sections are too few and far between. The dinos are weaved skilfully into the general puzzling, and in certain sequences you can even spawn your own dinosaurs to take on larger conundrums, but as soon as you get used to the idea of piloting your own moulded giant reptile, it's back to the normal action.

With this relative lack of gameplay ambition, *LEGO Jurassic World* isn't exactly essential. Given the quality of recent games – *Bloodborne*, *The Witcher III* and *Batman: Arkham Knight* – it's hard to recommend such a predictable experience to an older audience. If you have played a *LEGO* game before, there is absolutely nothing here that will surprise you or push you in any way. You'll know exactly what to do the second that you see it, and while it never disappoints, never fails to entertain, and rarely struggles to raise a smile, it's hard to get truly excited. To say it's overly familiar is like saying velociraptors are a bit grumpy.

So it comes down to a question of fandom. Does *Jurassic Park* cultivate the same kind of manic following as the other recent LEGO games' subject matters? Are people dressing up like a gallimimus at ComicCon? Well, given *Jurassic World*'s performance at the cinema, perhaps they are. And as with everything Traveller's Tales puts its little curved plastic hands to, this is fan service perfection. Every character has abilities that perfectly sum up their personalities (Lex Murphy's glass-shattering scream is a highlight, although your speakers might disagree), and there are so many characters to unlock that you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd missed a ten-season *Jurassic Park* TV show. Surely there aren't that many people in four movies? Apparently there are.

So another tremendously well-made blockbuster from the LEGO factory, once again proving that there is no room for second-rate movie tie-ins any more and that no-one understands how to get the most out of classic movie franchises like Traveller's Tales. But like the dinosaurs, it's only so much time before they'll have to evolve.


Above: The audio issues really are odd. Getting the best lines from the movie directly into the game isn't a bad idea, but they sound like they're being played on someone's phone. The mix is terrible.

BETTER THAN
JURASSIC PARK

WORSE THAN
LEGO MARVEL SUPER HEROES

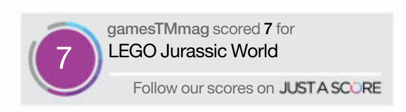
FAQs

Q. HOW MANY DINOSAURS?
Every dino you see in the movies, plus a few more.

Q. IS JEFF GOLDBLUM IN IT?
Yes. LEGO Goldblum is a fine fellow indeed.

Q. IS THERE AN OPEN WORLD?
You can explore the island, but it's not as well-realised as other LEGO worlds.

VERDICT
TYPICALLY POLISHED AND ENJOYABLE, IF OVERLY FAMILIAR



TIME IS THE GREATEST ENEMY OF ALL

Massive Chalice

Strategy games have conditioned us to believe that mysterious species, superior firepower and unbreakable defences are the biggest threat to humanity's ongoing survival. *Massive Chalice* baulks at the notion, instead forcing us to come to the horrible realisation that time, not aliens, is the biggest killer of all. When fighting the long war – as you're trying to survive against an ancient enemy for 300 years – you'll quickly discover that, while you can be the very best strategist in the world, none of that matters unless you can get your soldiers to sex you up some healthy bloodlines.

And so *Massive Chalice* taught **games™** two very valuable lessons in just a handful of hours: 1) We know nothing about the nuances of procreation. 2) We shouldn't be allowed to dabble with eugenics. This became especially apparent after our entire kingdom crumbled against the Cadence after just 200 years, under what can only be described as the weight of accidental incest. We believed we had unified the realm; forged strong houses and stronger bloodlines by pairing off our best warriors to sex it up, watch over the land and have kids that we could later call up to help with the war effort. We guided the rise of dynasties and, eventually, our own downfall, as we ended up with a bunch of soldiers too stupid to hold a weapon, let alone use it.

And that's *Massive Chalice* for you. Double Fine has unleashed a potent combination of intense marital strategy and familiar turn-based combat. In many ways it feels like a direct descendent of *X-COM: Enemy Unknown* and *Fire Emblem: Awakening*, though it doesn't bear either game's polish or commitment to fostering a continuously fun experience. But as we've come to learn from *Massive Chalice*, traits and flourishes of personality diminish across bloodlines, and it's tough to blame a child for failing to live up to its ancestors' legacy.

Still, where were we? Oh, yeah, the incest that crumbled a 200-year war effort. It started with an accidental sibling marriage here – there are a *lot* of menus to sift through – though eventually we just turned a blind eye to the House of Oftbacker and its taboo antics. We needed warriors, and they were pumping them out like armour-clad bunnies.

Below: *Massive Chalice* is a fun new entry into the console strategy game effort, though it isn't as deep as some of its contemporaries.

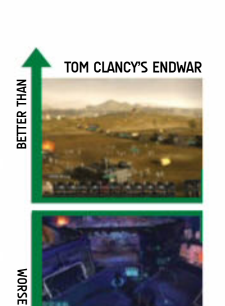


DETAILS
FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Double Fine
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

A HOUSE BORN OF CARELESS INCEST CAN QUICKLY WRECK DECADES OF DOMINANCE

The pair passed their greatest strengths and weaknesses down onto the children; new hybrid-classes were created, strong traits were being upheld by the bloodline, and for a time it looked like The Cadence wouldn't stand a chance. But as soon as you lose sight of the larger battle – the war of genetics – it all goes to hell. Archers were being born too nervous to fire arrows, melee warriors were too weedy to fight and the alchemists couldn't aim an explosive flask to save their life.

Battles play out in typical *X-COM* fashion, though not nearly as tight or engrossing as that much loved strategy king of the last generation. As your kingdom is attacked, *Massive Chalice* becomes a turn-based squad-tactics game that swaps out lasers and tech for swords and shields. Every hero in battle has two action points to spend per turn, which can be used for movement, attacks or special abilities. You might only see five or six battles every hundred years, and so the difficulty curve is pretty punishing. A terrifying fog of war clouds the battlefield, and enemies won't hesitate to pounce, punish and put an end to a long-running bloodline.



The core combat loop is fun, but limited. The six enemy types quickly become fairly predictable, and it's as they begin to age your warriors to death or leech your XP that the frustration sets in. It also doesn't help that the maps are huge, and you'll waste plenty of time attempting to navigate the fogs of war before you get the opportunity to drop into battles. It bares the solid basics of *X-COM*, but lacks its nuance. Never did we really feel like we had the agency to plan and execute grand battle plans – this is especially grating when a battle crosses the twenty minute mark only to be swiftly brought to an end because a Cadence swooped in from nowhere and *infuriatingly* teleported your melee troops away, leaving

MANAGING A KINGDOM ISN'T EASY

When you're not wrapped up in battles – both on the battlefield and in the bedroom – there's a bunch of busywork to be done, though it quickly feels tacked-on instead of properly integrated. There's research to be done and building decisions to be made, though this quickly becomes secondary to everything else that's going on. It's a shame, because without these elements, *Massive Chalice* can sometimes feel a little light on content. It's tough to focus on the elements outside of battle, because so much of the game is decided by the random genepool. Sure, you might have advanced weapons, but none of that will matter in a fight if one of your characters has decided to be so hungover they can't move.

FAQs

Q. SO IT'S BASICALLY X-COM?
Sort of, though not as refined. Still, it's the closest thing we have on Xbox One right now.

Q. IS IT DIFFICULT?
Massive Chalice is incredibly challenging; you'll want to play a few games on basic difficulty before you ramp it up.

Q. HOW DOES IT RUN?
Double Fine has done a great job on *Massive Chalice* in this respect, it runs smoothly and with little interruption.



Left: If you want to get the most out of *Massive Chalice*, you'll want to give it multiple playthroughs. Some of the mechanics can be tough to get your head around, especially in the later years of the war.

Above: The battles can be a real slog; the maps are a little big and the enemies too unrelenting to create any real sense of ongoing fun.

the archers defenceless and bound for death. Still, as battles are so few and far between, you'll find that you won't get attached to soldiers like you would in *X-COM*.

In fact, most of your soldiers won't actually last for more than four battles – they will simply die of old age – but you *will* get attached to those individual bloodlines. And you'll quickly feel the pressure to forge fertile love connections; it isn't entirely uncommon to find entire classes of soldier extinct within a few hours of playing the game or, if you've had an especially bad battle, out of soldiers all together. Bad genetic planning can crumble entire games right from the start and while it's initially amusing to work out how you could have avoided disaster by, let's say, opting to not pair up the archer with a drunken disposition and the weak willed melee fighter, it can be immensely tedious to reach these moments of clarity.

FINGERPRINT

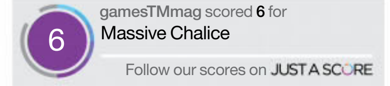
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

MARITAL PROBLEMS: Your entire army is made up of the kids that your older soldiers breed – you need to procreate responsibly or face the consequences.

Massive Chalice is a fun new take on the strategy genre, but multiple playthroughs make you realise how many of the game's winning/losing deciders are randomised from the outset. It's a game with a huge amount of ambition, not to mention imagination, but a few unrefined core mechanics and tedious world can overshadow all of its fun. Still, if you want to see how a house born of careless incest can quickly wreck decades of dominance, you'll want to give this a try. If only Jaime Lannister had been given an Xbox One when Winter eventually arrived, *Game Of Thrones* might have been a different story entirely.

VERDICT

CHAOTICALLY FUN IN DOSES, BUT LACKING IN VITALITY





Above: You'll be able to see an overview of your kingdom as you fast forward through time, though the game will bring you back to the present when it's time to manage deaths in a family, Cadence attacks and upgrades.

DEUS EX MACHINA

Infinifactory

It's only in playing *Infinifactory* that we've realised just how stagnant the puzzle genre is. It's a revelatory experience, one that leaves you wondering why all games of the genre can't match this sense of freedom. For all the options available to gamers, puzzle games are more often than not very explicit about their solutions; and as rewarding as those solutions may be when you succeed, very few can match the sense of achievement in completing one of *Infinifactory*'s stages. See, this is a game that tasks you with designing and building a production line, combining core blocks together to match a required template. How you do that is completely up to you; the game gives you only a handful of necessary tools with which to build your factory but simultaneously offers up unlimited options.

Puzzles begin simple enough, introducing blocks in a very clear manner. Initially, this means little more than welding blocks together in a specific order before sending them off to the finish line. The real challenge begins once larger blueprints are expected of you, tasking you with not only welding individual pieces together before combining them into the corresponding shape but also rotating your creations, stamping them with monitors or using a mixture of blockers, pushers, lifters and signal detectors to manipulate the different timings of different parts of your factory. If we've lost you at this point, know that it's *much* more satisfying than it sounds.

By the end you'll have refurbished tanks, built plasma cannons and even welded together an entire studio apartment through thoughtful consideration and trial-and-error design. Make no mistake, *Infinifactory* is not an easy game; but this is what makes it all the more fantastic as the solution springs from your very own mind – your method of building a particular item could be completely different to a friend's. With *Infinifactory* you're not solving a puzzle, but instead devising an answer to a problem; a sort of show-your-working kind of game.

There's a beauty in the honesty of the game. There *is* an underlying storyline, but it never impedes on the core gameplay, an issue that a number of modern puzzle games struggle to contend with. It's always clear about what you have to do, and there is no dialogue or text boxes to explain every minute point. The most you're given is an image detailing each

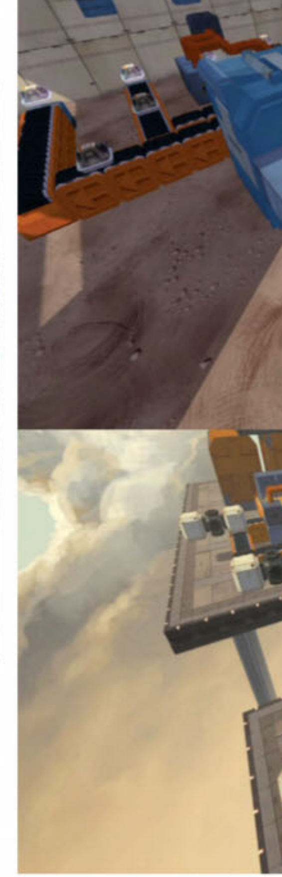
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Zachtronics Industries
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £18.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, 1.5GB HDD Space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Above: There's a sense that you are building a military force for these aliens, but that's nothing compared to the sense of pride you'll get after a job well done. So few puzzle games these days offer that same feeling of achievement. Right: The later stages twist the core mechanics a little, providing tests that aren't especially challenging but mix up the rules in interesting ways.





WELCOME YOUR NEW OVERLORDS

The story of *Infinifactory* is a simple one: you're abducted by aliens and forced to build things for their empire. These range from military machines to food processing plants, and it's all done with very little guidance. Audio logs can be found in certain stages and are sufficient to providing a little bit of colour and insight, but all told it's refreshing to not have a story forced into a game that doesn't need one. Even towards the end – where the story does escalate to an extent – it remains unintrusive and passive. The closest the game comes to brandishing its tale in your face is the few seconds-long performance reviews, where garbled alien words are offered alongside a workout VHS and a trayful of food pellets. Humorous, takes no time at all, and is free of bother.



AS GOOD AS

BESIEGE



WORSE THAN



FACTORIO

FAQs

Q. HOW HARD?
Depends on your ability to solve problems, of course, but there are some real head-scratchers in there.

Q. STEEP LEARNING CURVE?
It's good for teaching you new methods early on, but it's not afraid to throw you into the deep end either.

Q. ENOUGH PUZZLES?
By its end you'll be clamouring for more, but that'd be overlooking the many hours you've already spent playing the game.

new process you encounter, in a fashion similar to an Ikea-style flat pack manual. At no point is it unclear as to what is expected of you; information is skilfully imparted onto the player without ever uttering a word, and *Infinifactory* is perhaps one of the greatest examples of how to do just that. It all builds to create one of the most rewarding puzzle games we've seen in a long time, since every moment with the game comes via your own interpretation – story-focused audio logs aside.

This sense of discovery is enhanced dramatically via a graph system, too, a means by which you are scored on the total number of blocks you've used, the footprint or size of the factory itself and the number of cycles you have to run through to create ten of your required object. You'll even be compared to any friends that might've played that stage, too, urging you into a long-term game of oneupmanship. Though you may be proud of your solution, you'll often find these end of level charts spur you on to find better and better solutions. As already mentioned, every player will have their preferred go-to methods for solving these problems and often those will suffice to get the job done, but with these stats you'll find yourself eager to devise new strategies that ordinarily you might not have considered. It'll sit in your brain as the working day ticks over, eating at your consciousness until – *suddenly* – it twigs and you find yourself jotting down crude circuit diagrams to help you remember that new contraption design. Each stage comes with a slot for three different solutions too, an in-game acknowledgment that there's more to *Infinifactory* than just finding an answer. It's a game that thrives on the post-success tweaks and alterations.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

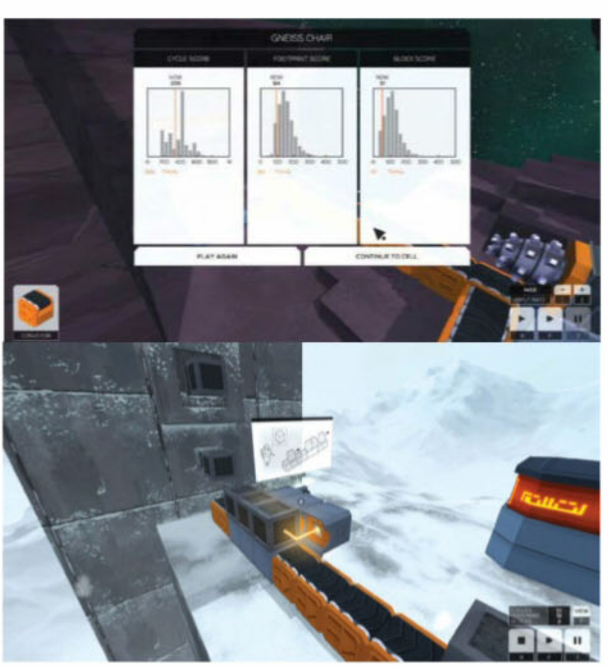
BLOCKHEADED: Though the comparisons with *Minecraft* will be inevitable (*Infiniminer* did inspire Notch's creation), its unique sandbox puzzle environments offer a completely different game.

And in truth that's where the longevity of *Infinifactory* lies. Though there is a sandbox option to craft a factory of your own design, without the prescripted blueprints to match it can feel a little underwhelming. There's less inspiration involved when you're not having to work out a solution, and the limited tools available – while better for the main stages – means that there's not much desire to express any real creativity. In all likelihood you'll skip the sandbox option entirely and instead focus on building a brand new, more efficient system in a level that you've previously played.

YOU'RE NOT SOLVING A PUZZLE, BUT DEVISING AN ANSWER TO A PROBLEM

With that said, it does pin a lot of hopes on players really getting to grips with the sandbox puzzle experience. If you're the sort who has no intention of competing – whether it's with others or your own sense of perfectionism – then a lot of the value in *Infinifactory* itself will dissipate. There's a good number of stages to get through and the latter ones will definitely get you thinking longer and harder than the earlier ones combined, but its selection isn't exactly bountiful.

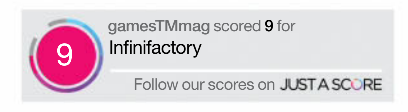
At that point you may want to turn to the Steam Workshop, a place where other players have used the sandbox mode to create their own challenges you can test yourself with. Many won't offer up the same complexities as the main game, but at that point *Infinifactory* will have its hooks in you; your brain will *need* something – anything – to chew on while the workday ticks over.



Above: Zachtronics really should be commended for the way it handles introducing new mechanics and tools; no energy is expended trying to get what it is that you should be doing. Left: New blocks are even introduced late into the game, meaning the earlier puzzles often have simpler solutions. Can you spot the minor mistake in this production line?

VERDICT

ONE OF THE MOST REWARDING PUZZLE GAMES IN A WHILE



HOW WE'VE MYTHED YOU

God Of War III Remastered

Sony's customary mastery of its own hardware has resulted in some of contemporary gaming's grandest watershed moments. Nobody sensible would dismiss the narrative or structural achievements of *Shadow Of The Colossus* or *Uncharted*'s first sequel, but those games were defined (initially, at least) by their transcendent technical showmanship. For some, Sony's biggest tentpoles just don't feel right unless the machine that's running them appears to be buckling under their unparalleled technological weight, and returning to old blockbusters after half a decade expecting that same energising rush is a fool's errand.

But like the duo of aforementioned first-party collossi, *God Of War III*'s comprehensive quality, purely in gameplay terms, comfortably offsets its mild failure as an industrial showpiece. *God of War II* may be the perennial choice of the aficionados, but its follow-up genuinely warranted the same kind of hushed reverence back in 2010. Despite a few inexplicable scenery-based control hiccups – all of them hangovers from the PS3 original – a surprisingly small amount of *God Of War III*'s gutsy power has been lost in time.

However, it's disappointing to note that this is a very routine kind of remaster. All of the PS3 version's downloadable content is included here, but that amounts to a small handful of character skins and Challenge of Exile mode; a totally unremarkable set of assessments that is as lightweight and disposable as you'd expect from an add-on that arrived before DLC was really a thing. While the game is frequently sumptuous visually (and the frame-rate is great) the gloss is very clumsily applied at points. The souped-up titans often look as awe-inspiring as they did five years ago, but some of the characters that appear later on in the story – Zeus' boozy wife Hera in particular – look as if their character models were left completely untouched. Other characters fare better, but only when they're not moving: the mostly stiff and robotic facial animations look antiquated even when propped up by state-of-the-art dynamic lighting effects.

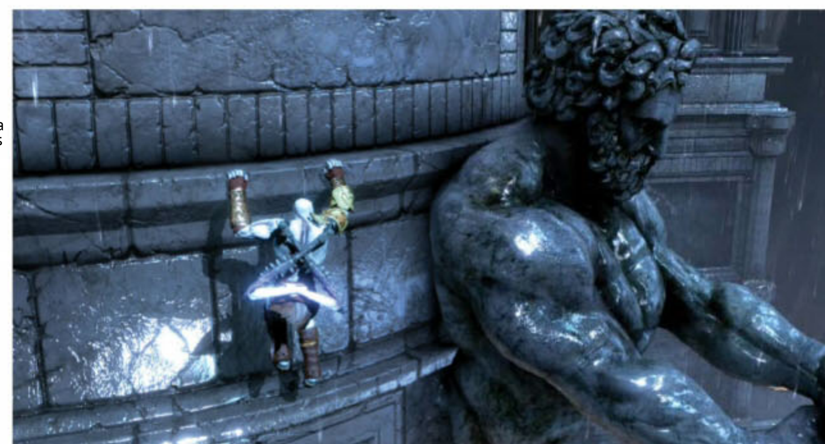
The 2010 iteration also had its fair share of control issues, and none of them have been remedied here. From stray distant scenery that's traversable until you're forced to commit suicide, to the game forgetting which way is up when you transition between perspectives, there are quite a few unfortunate artefacts here that arrive courtesy of a team that was arguably a little too concerned with over-delivering on spectacle at the time. And the less said about the thumbstick-based combat prompts (when you're suddenly asked to perform a gesture with a stick that you're already using to side-strafe around an enemy) the better.

And yet, *God of War III* remains a consistently scintillating action game. Structurally it's a masterpiece, seamlessly weaving platforming, puzzling and combat sections together so effectively that the gameplay almost seems to have a narrative of its own. The pace is certainly relentless, but the learning curve is beyond

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: SCE Santa Monica Studio, Wholesale Algorithms
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Right: In 2010, *God Of War III*'s cinematics were touted as being in-engine rather than pre-rendered, and that's still true today. However, those cutscenes have not been tinkered with as much as the in-game play, and the juxtaposition is jarring.



Above: Players looking for control tweaks are going to be disappointed: the controls are exactly the same as they were in the 2010 original.





Right: Trophy fans will be disappointed to learn that *God of War III Remastered* has exactly the same trophies as its PS3 counterpart. There's nothing preventing players from getting both sets, but fans looking for new challenges might be frustrated.

THE PACE IS CERTAINLY RELENTLESS, BUT THE LEARNING CURVE IS BEYOND COMPARE



BETTER THAN

GOD OF WAR: ASCENSION





WORSE THAN

DMC: DEVIL MAY CRY

FAQs

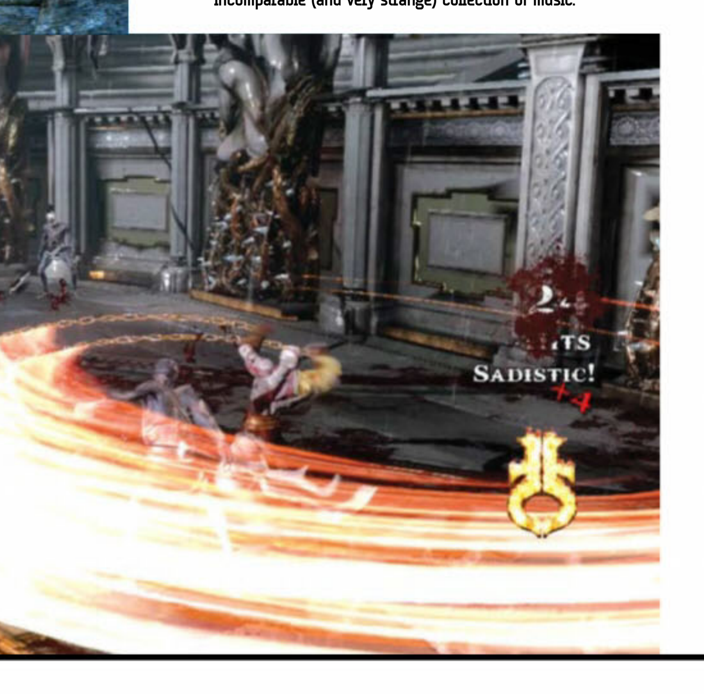
Q. CAN YOU TAKE PICTURES?
Yes. Sony's habit of bringing a 'Photo Mode' to their first-party releases continues.

Q. IS THE SEX SCENE STILL HERE?
Yes. The absurd Aphrodite sequence remains, and it's still played a little too straight for comfort.

Q. IS THE VIOLENCE STILL OTT?
Undoubtedly. Kratos is all about severe bloody vengeance, and this definitely still isn't a game for young children.

LOOPS OF FURY

One of the best reasons for revisiting *God of War III* comes in the shape of its phenomenal soundtrack. Composed by five different musicians who didn't collaborate with each other even fleetingly, it's a mad and disjointed soundtrack to a mad and disjointed videogame. Marketing bumf that was distributed in the run-up to launch heralded *God of War III* as the "final instalment" of the series, and much of the soundtrack sounds as if it's heralding the end of the world, let alone the third of a run of eminently daft videogames. Gerard Marino, Ron Fish, Cris Velasco, Mike Reagan and Jeff Rona independently recorded their pieces at Skywalker Sound with the Skywalker Symphony Orchestra, and it's an incomparable (and very strange) collection of music.



compare and for a game this overblown, you somehow never feel intimidated by it; lulls and gaps in the chaos are as thoughtfully placed and downright welcome as they've ever been in a project of this kind.

And there is something intensely appealing about the sheer madness of it. Rather than attempt to top the magnificent elegance of the first game's narrative (which took form around flashbacks, as Kratos plummeted into the Aegean Sea after committing suicide) *God Of War III* is a mad blast that's as funny as it is clever, and as bracing as it is idiotic. Credited to four writers but coming across like the work of at least fifteen – who incidentally never agreed on a tone, let alone a final draft – it's the kind of attention deficit lunacy that would exasperate and infuriate if whip-taut gameplay wasn't attached to it. Stories this demented just aren't told in any other medium, at least not in this kind of fully interactive way, and broadly speaking, the tack just makes sense: Kratos has never been angrier than he is here, so what better way to close a trilogy than with a trip into his unglued brain?

Watching as Kratos is suddenly reduced to a fully playable speck on the arm or head of a gargantuan titan has lost none of its power to bewilder, and despite a fairly healthy stream of imitators over the past half-decade, the same goes for the combat. But is *God Of War III Remastered* worth picking up if you still have the original sitting at home on PS3? The answer to that question is a resounding no. Handled by a company called Wholesale Algorithms (which, their website suggests, is merely a two-person team) this is an upgrade that's almost expressly visual, and thus only really of interest to people who are locked into their PS4s and exclusively want software that looks like it belongs on it. This remaster fits that bill, but the experience is far too similar to the PS3 version to warrant a serious recommendation to owners of the original game.

But if you've never played a *God Of War* game before, this is arguably the perfect place to start. The third instalment functions as a piece of fan service every bit as well as it works as a hysterical standalone rollercoaster, and it still feels like a project that was born of sweat, passion and risk rather than anything calculated or duty-bound. And if you're a newcomer who is still sceptical about stepping into Kratos' ultraviolent universe? One can only cite the maniac himself: "What treachery is this, you coward?"

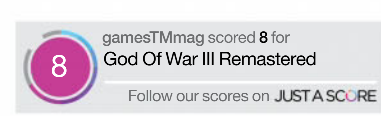
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

LUDICROUS VIOLENCE: Graphic and ludicrously over-the-top violence is not a new concept in videogames, but has ravenous brutality ever been this funny? Arguably, *God of War III* is a comedy.

VERDICT

NOT A GREAT PACKAGE, BUT A TRULY GREAT GAME





Left: Melee combinations are given a showcase treatment with some fancy camera close-ups, showing off your character looking cool. Though such interludes last only a second or two, it's a welcome moment of respite from the relentless pace of battle.

OLD-SCHOOL COMBAT RISES AGAIN

Rise Of Incarnates

***Rise Of Incarnates* bears all the hallmarks of a modern videogame – a free-to-play business model, online-focused design and a setting ripe for further commercial exploitation.** Yet beneath these features, the core of the design goes back to the early days of 3D combat games. That's not actually a bad thing though – *Rise Of Incarnates* borrows a lot from Sega's *Virtual On* series, a fact that can be traced back to its roots as a Westernised take on Bandai Namco's own *Gundam Vs Mech* combat games.

The goal of each game is rather simple: team up with another player to take down a team of two opponents with melee and ranged attacks. The two-on-two battle format gives the game a frenetic pace, as you can be totally blindsided while setting up attacks and you can perform some fairly heroic rescues from across the arena. The arenas themselves are mostly open and have few cover spots, encouraging direct combat.

The game's key wrinkle is that it sensibly doesn't pretend to directly balance characters. Instead, fighters consume a different number of the team's shared life gauge based on how powerful and durable they are. The vast majority of characters fit into the two-segment bracket (one third of the gauge), with a few heavy hitters taking three segments and only two in the weakest category. The choice is genuinely meaningful, as combatants range from agile melee specialists to lumbering ranged fighters.

While the core combat is fun, the framework surrounding it is a little lacking. Further customisation options feel rather flimsy. Players can assign various upgrades to a skill grid, which starts off small but can be expanded with extensive play (or cash). These failed to have a noticeable impact on gameplay – we swapped them in and out and barely noticed an effect. There's little to work towards beyond upgrading your characters at present – a more solid ranking system and tournament structure would improve this game.

However, even with those gripes, it's well worth investing some time in *Rise Of Incarnates*. The game provides a relatively unique experience amongst today's releases, and the combat is well structured. Everything it offers is good – we just feel it could offer a little more.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CLIMBING THE LADDER: A ladder system, tournaments or other formal competition options beyond simple ranked battles could elevate *Rise Of Incarnates* from a good game to a real obsession.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
MINIMUM SPEC: Intel Core i3 2.5GHz / AMD Phenom II X4 910, 4GB RAM, GeForce GT 630 / Radeon HD 5870, 10GB hard disk space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

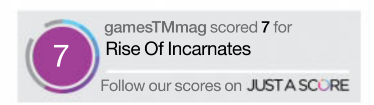
BETTER THAN: ANARCHY REIGNS

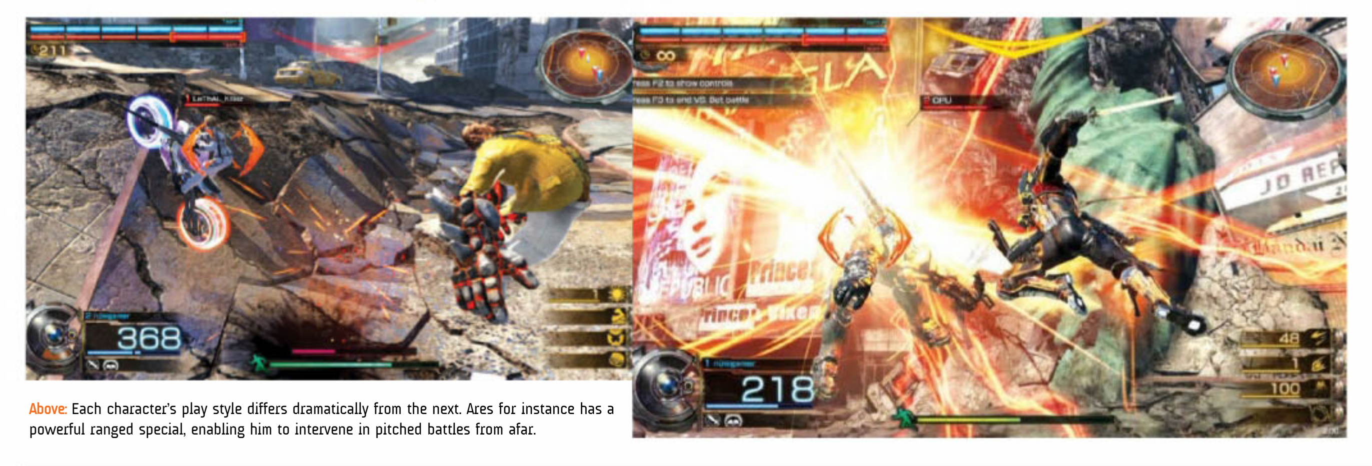


WORSE THAN: DISSIDIA: FINAL FANTASY

VERDICT

EXPECT GREAT COMBAT, BUT LITTLE ELSE





Above: Each character's play style differs dramatically from the next. Ares for instance has a powerful ranged special, enabling him to intervene in pitched battles from afar.

STARTING TO LOOK TYRED…

MotoGP 15





Above: Wet weather plays havoc with an already difficult to master handling system. It's vital in such situations to learn and understand just how to feather the throttle when accelerating out of corners in order to not find yourself flying over the handlebars.

Motorbike games suffer enormously across all platforms thanks to this medium's default input devices. More so than even racing games featuring cars, the analogue stick is simply incapable of replicating – to any significant degree – the act of piloting a bike; holding the handlebars, leaning into corners, performing the most minute of touches to glide smoothly around shallow corners. Games such as *MotoGP* don't have the luxury of a 'racing wheel' equivalent.

This is a game that's at a handicap before things have even begun, then. Not that we should necessarily feel sorry for it. After all, the *MotoGP* series has had plenty of chances to overcome its hurdles and beat its problems. So it's a bit of a shame, given that pedigree and given that necessity to explore options to pacify its input woes, that developer Milestone has played it so safe here.

Support for the PS3 and Xbox 360 is a nice touch in a charitable sense, but it seems to have had a clear impact on the new-generation product. While satisfying when you get it right, the handling model feels like a rehash of last year; the exact same muscle memory serving you just as well here as it did then. You might say that that's not a problem, but before you do let's not kid ourselves into believing that this is a simulation that has already gotten as close to real-life as it's possible to get. Improvements to realism are vital for a game of this sort, and it's impossible to pinpoint any genuine upgrades here.

There are also disappointments to be had in terms of visuals and frame-rates, both failing to reach par for the Xbox One. Riders and bikes perform perfectly well, but trackside aesthetics are very much of the 2012 vintage; with trees that look as though they've been sculptured from cardboard and spectators with only the slightest human resemblance.

Still, the challenge of simply getting your bike around the track with the assists off rewards you with significant satisfaction. Getting a top three finish is a genuine achievement under such conditions and in those moments it's easy to forgive the game for any faults.

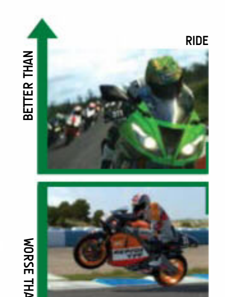
If you are a fanatic of the sport and are looking to engage with it in another way then there is fun to be had here, just don't go into it expecting the kind of new-generation upgrades that the most recent car-based equivalent (*Project CARS*, *Forza* et al) have enjoyed so far.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PS3, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Italy
PUBLISHER: Milestone
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-12
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

RIDE



WORSE THAN

MOTOGP 14

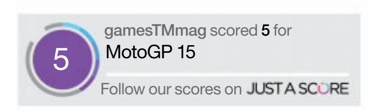
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

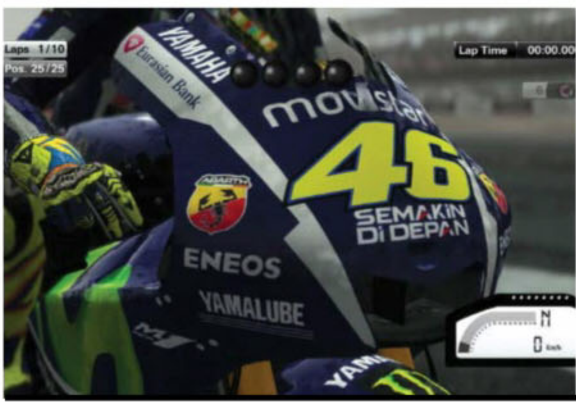
NEW-GEN?: It would be expensive, but it's about time this series saw a dedicated new-gen console release. Play this on the Xbox One and it's clear the console is barely breaking a sweat.

VERDICT

ENJOYABLE, BUT SUFFERS FROM A LACK OF UPGRADES



Below: Up close and personal there's little to complain about when it comes to bikes and their riders, but at speed and in the heat of the moment the visual impact is significantly less impressive. It just barely looks like a new-gen game.





THE LIGHT SIDE OF THE NUCLEAR APOCALYPSE

Fallout Shelter

The big takeaway from playing *Fallout Shelter* should probably be that you can slap this theme onto just about anything and it immediately becomes 50 per cent more fun. If this is the beginning of Bethesda spreading this IP around a little more, then we're on board. We'll lap up the *Fallout* card games, *Fallout* racers and *Fallout FIFA*s if that's what's on the way. We imagine they'll be just as much fun as this is, even if they too aren't all that deep of an experience.

At its core, this is a resource management game. You're looking after your energy, water and food supplies as well as managing your people. It's a balancing act that can be easily achieved and maintained, but that alone doesn't really tell you what this is all about. If that was the only thing you were chasing, this wouldn't be much of a game at all. What you're really after is all those unlockables and fan-service nods. Keeping the dwellers happy, watered and fed is all well and good, but with the 21 special dwellers to find, 90 outfits, and 139 weapons hidden in the game, the real prize is to get them all. But you have to keep reaching.

So you're invited to deliberately imbalance your community for the promise of a little more. You set up your dwellers to have kids because population milestones bring new rooms. You build training facilities for better efficiency. And you'll send your dwellers out into the wastes with nothing but a pop-gun and a couple of stimpaks for the promise of a few extra bottle caps and perhaps a new outfit. There's risk and reward to be had, but it's the kind of reward fans can appreciate more than anyone else can.

The rest of the game's appeal comes largely from the things it doesn't attempt to do. There's no requests to rate the app, in-app purchases are present, but offer no gargantuan gain that can't be attained by time rather than money, and it's not constantly pestering you for attention. Leave your Vault alone for a few hours and you might need to spend a little time getting your resources back up, but nothing too untoward will have happened. Everything will be waiting for you.

So what's the downside of all this? It's really not all that deep of a game. There's not a massive variety of rooms, you can't really interact with your dwellers much and while being Overseer of a Vault makes for a good title, it doesn't have much of the sinister side to it that makes *Fallout*'s Overseer position so interesting. What we're getting at is there's not much space for classic simulation sadism here. It's all happiness and accumulation, which is fine and pleasant, but not gripping.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Bethesda Softworks
DEVELOPER: Bethesda Game Studios
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

FARMING SIMULATOR 15





WORSE THAN

THE SIMS 4

Below: Sending your dwellers out into the wasteland can be very rewarding as they bring back guns and outfits for the vault. But keep an eye on them, because they can be killed out there.



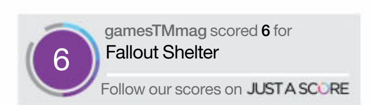
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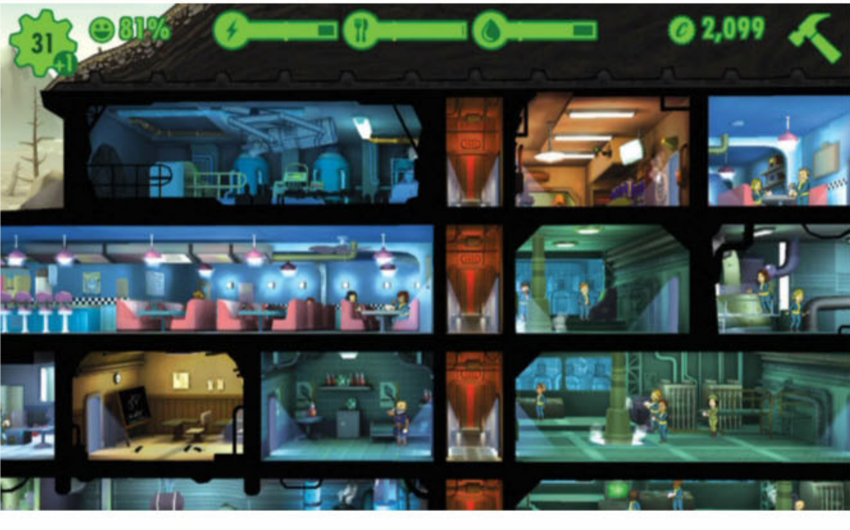
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DARK DAYS: *Fallout* Vaults are known for being notoriously strange places and being given experimental objectives would have tied into the Overseer role rather nicely.

VERDICT

FUN, QUIRKY, BUT NOT TERRIBLY DEEP







Above: Keep an eye on your dweller's specialities based on the SPECIAL system. Each room has a skill set that best suits one of those categories and getting the best people will improve efficiency.

ENGINE FAILURE BEFORE THE SECOND PIT STOP

F1 2015

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Codemasters
DEVELOPER: Codemasters Birmingham
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-16
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

F1 2014





PROJECT CARS

WORSE THAN

Spare a sympathetic thought for Codemasters, the developer of *F1.* Trying to make an enjoyable game from a sport that is arguably experiencing the most tiresome, predictable and cynically viewed period it has ever 'enjoyed' can be no easy task. Why would anyone that doesn't classify himself or herself as a Formula 1 obsessive invest their cash in a digital edition of a motor sport in which there are only two cars with a legitimate chance of success?

It's a shame that this underwhelming period in the sport's history has coincided with Codemasters' *F1* making its debut on the new(est) consoles. What should have been a celebration centred on embracing more powerful technology is instead tainted before you even begin.

However, despite some impressive visuals and a handling model that is pleasingly challenging to get to grips with, *F1 2015* doesn't do itself many favours as a stand-alone entity. There is a complete lack of game modes beyond the perfunctory and the essential, preventing you from feeling at all engaged unless you've got the kind of time required to take on entire seasons of practise sessions, qualifying and races.

Given how boorish F1 currently is, you'd have thought that this year would provide the perfect excuse for Codemasters to deliver some more interesting ways to race and strut your stuff on the track. Hamilton and Rosberg might be the only drivers worth betting on, but a slew of extra-curricular challenges would have given reason to get excited about stepping into a McLaren, Sauber or Red Bull.

Career mode has gone entirely, preventing you from ever being able to progress through any kind of journey as a driver.



Above: Purists will tell you that the cockpit cam is the 'only' way to play. Whether you believe that or not, it's worth trying to get to grips with.



FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ENJOY THE VIEW: The visuals on offer here represent a significant upgrade on anything this series has ever gotten close to. Track design is impressive. Circuits beam with colour and detail.

The core racing can be satisfying, particularly in those dramatic moments in which you're sandwiched in a group with rain carpeting the track. With the traction control off, there exists a palpable stress and excitement in knowing that any kind of tap to the throttle at the wrong moment will result in you hitting the barrier.

When these kinds of moments occur at the tail end of a season it's difficult not to be impressed by just how involved you feel. Certainly, it's an improvement on the *F1* offerings of the past few years.

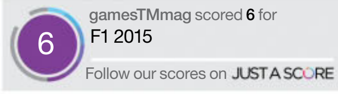
Ultimately there's just not enough to get excited about. Tense and exhilarating racing also exists in the likes of *Project CARS*, a game with far more depth for those seeking a long term indulgence.



Above: Rain effects are genuinely impressive, both cosmetically and due to their impact on your performance. Tread carefully.

VERDICT

IMPRESSIVE AT TIMES, BUT WELL BEATEN BY THE COMPETITION



IT'S A SLOW WALK, BUT SUCH VIEWS

Kholat



Above: Encountered ten minutes into the game, this uninviting passageway is the first sign that your mountain trek is going to be anything but jolly. In terms of atmosphere there are very few games released this year that can match *Kholat*.

With the PC gaming market saturated by first-person survival horror experiences these days, it would take something special to stand out. *Kholat* certainly fits that bill, but only in certain aspects.

Based on a real-life incident in 1959 in which a group of hikers mysteriously died on a Russian mountain, *Kholat* sees you travelling to said mountain in an attempt to figure out exactly what happened. Armed with just a flashlight, a compass and a map with a list of co-ordinates scrawled on it, you're tasked with heading to each location to see what you can find there. Naturally, it emerges you're not alone.

The one thing guaranteed to strike you immediately when you first play *Kholat* is how incredible it looks. Initially dumping you at a train station at the foot of the mountain, the game makes use of *Unreal Engine 4* to create some truly atmospheric and beautifully detailed locations. Polish studio IMGN.PRO may be a relative unknown in the gaming world but its mastery of the engine's graphical capabilities can't be questioned.

It's unfortunate that the engine can't work similar wonders with game design, as for all its jaw-dropping scenery, *Kholat* is also plentiful in fist-gnawing moments. The mountain is riddled with numerous instant-death locations that kill you without warning, sending you back to a sparsely-distributed checkpoint that may have been reached half an hour ago. The glowing orange ghosts that inhabit the mountain are also able to kill you with one hit, with their bizarre AI and their ability to seemingly teleport in front of you at inopportune moments causing all sorts of frustration.

Meanwhile, your secondary task is to collect the missing crew's remarkably well-preserved diary pages, which have been scattered throughout the mountain.

Kholat does so much right. Its scenery is breathtaking, its sound design is unnerving and the poorly-written story is given some sense of credence thanks to narration by Sean Bean. But this is all forgotten every time you get stuck on a piece of scenery or fall to your doom through no fault of your own.

You'll experience numerous highs and lows. This is one of the most beautiful independent games released to date, but the cheap environments and page-collecting, ghost-dodging gameplay make it little more than *Slender* in the snow.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: IMGN.PRO
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: GeForce GTX 470, 4GB RAM, Intel Core i3
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



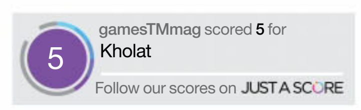
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

YOUR MAP: The map of the mountain is annoyingly vague and it's too easy to completely lose your bearings. That may be the point but it's no less annoying for it.

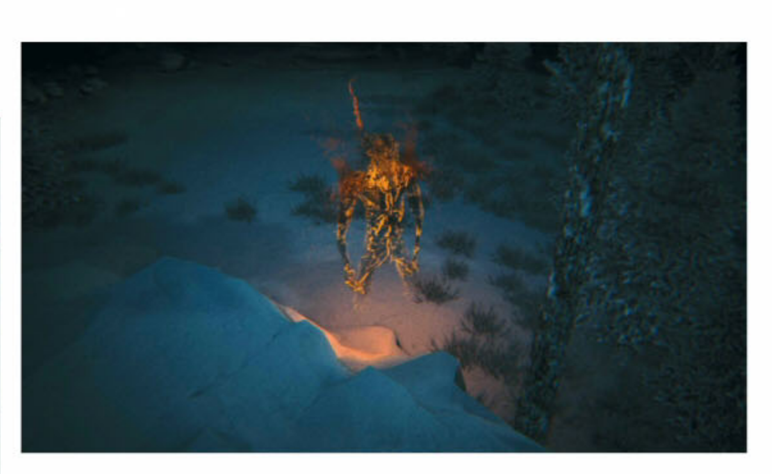
VERDICT

VISUALLY STUNNING BUT A SLOG TO PLAY THROUGH



Below: Occasionally you'll see map co-ordinates scrawled on rocks. You can head to their locations on the map to uncover further clues about what happened to the missing crew, but the story is never satisfyingly concluded.







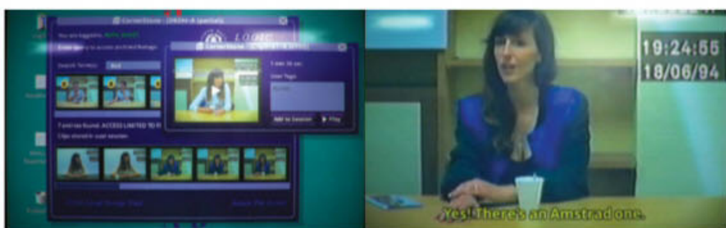
You'd think it would get tiresome, looking at these same screens over and over, but all we can see now are the differences in small details between them.

A FLY-ON-THE-WALL GAME

Her Story

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sam Barlow
DEVELOPER: in-house
PRICE: £3.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



***Her Story* burrowed into our brain and dug right in there, buried itself like a tic.** It made us compulsively obsessed with small details, it made us listen intently to the sole character's voice, replaying bytes of sound over and over again as we scanned for a crack in the voice, a change in pitch, a variance in intonation. It made us strain our eyes, scanning the Retina screen of the iPad we played it on pixel-by-pixel for anything we missed. *Her Story* got right into our brain, and we aren't going to forget it anytime soon.

You're a fly on the wall, an unnamed character looking through old archives stored in a Portsmouth police station, sifting through the messy records of a woman talking about her missing husband. Set in 1994, everything is full-motion video, complete with scan-lines and VHS distortion. It's fuzzy, it's warm, it's unsettling. The only thing missing is the buzz of the CRT monitor – even the UI mimics mid-Nineties institutional computer systems. It's authentic to the bone, and then some.

Full-motion video hasn't been used in games for a while, but *Her Story* repurposes the old format and revalidates it for the touchscreen generation: the way *Her Story* is laid out – making you feel like a haggard detective on your eighth coffee and ninetieth cigarette every time you open it up – pairs up with FMV perfectly. Your job is only to sit and watch, scratch your head and rearrange files. How the game makes that so compelling is artful.

We don't want to spoil the story of the game, but the way information unfolds based entirely on *your* train of thought and working process is revolutionary. You're basically using a real search engine to find fictional files, construct a timeline you *think* is correct and review the story accordingly. It sounds terse, it sounds dull, but there's something about the mystery that draws you in so adeptly, so easily, that we ended up completing the whole thing in one sitting. Following the narrative of *Her Story* is like picking at a trail of virtual breadcrumbs – if breakthrough actress Viva Seifert says a word you haven't searched for yet, you end up searching for it, which could open a whole new avenue of exploration for you, and you might well end up back at square one.

The player-directed (but game-dictated) progress system relies less on rewarding you for getting information right, and more on instilling a sense of personal victory into you: the game hopes you're driven by a desire to see this mess of videos and conjecture through to the end, no matter the cost. And we were. This game is a victory for the FMV, for mobile/PC games, and for the concept of interactive narrative as a whole.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

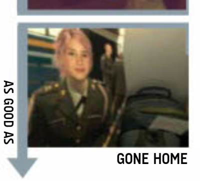
THE FLY ON THE WALL: The way the game plays with its presentation and deconstruction of player agency is stupendously clever. You'd think it would get dull, but it's surprisingly captivating.

BETTER THAN

SUNSET



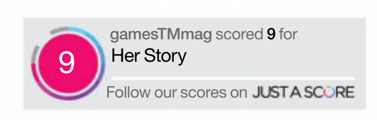
AS GOOD AS



GONE HOME

VERDICT

A STUNNING REALISATION OF WHAT NARRATIVE CAN BE



THE SPORT THAT'S SWEEPING THE NATION

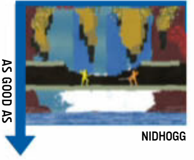
Rocket League

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Psyonix
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
SUPERSONIC ACROBATIC ROCKET POWERED BATTLE CARS





AS GOOD AS
NIDHOGG

You're sick of competitive multiplayer, right? These days it's all headshots and killstreaks, stymied unlocks and capturing bases, and regardless of the shade of brown that is used it's all feeling a little familiar. Irrespective of the machine gun you use, the only thing that seems to differ in competitive multiplayer these days is the particular language used to insult one another's mothers. Enter *Rocket League*, football via rocket-powered cars… and your new favourite multiplayer game.

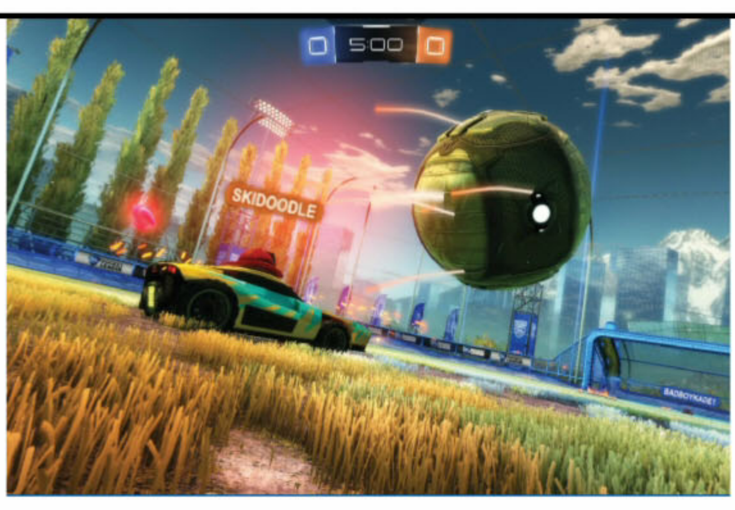
It's a simple concept but that simplicity makes it all the more absorbing to play. There's the same level of strategy and depth that might come from a typical football game, but with the added fantastical element of super-fast, boost-enabled rocket cars. You don't need to be a fan of football or racing games to find enjoyment in *Rocket League* and it'll appeal to anyone looking for a new thrill in gaming. And that's just what this game manages to offer, with a natural to-and-fro in each match that makes smashing in that game-winning goal all the more exhilarating. Imagine emptying a full tank of boost juice to cross the entire pitch for a last-ditch, match-securing save. Each match doesn't take too long either, meaning the desire to jump into just one more game is a constant – a perpetual, cyclical sensation of gratification. It's a hugely competitive game, too, with eSports already a fixture with a partnership with MLG, and with the variety of gameplay that comes from strategic differences in personal playstyles it could well make for a compelling new entry into the typically shooter and MOBA-infested eSports scene.

There are some minor concerns for Rocket League as a *product* though, that has to be said. A single-player tournament system – played with AI bots of differing difficulties – gives you scope to practise on your terms, but offers no real longevity and the lack of a human competitor restricts the otherwise exciting experience. It's a minor concern in the grand schemes of things, but worth drawing attention to all the same. The limited number of maps – and little variety among them – certainly keeps the core gameplay balanced and competitive, but at the expense of a necessary variety. If you're looking for a new experience then there are few multiplayer games as well balanced and enthralling as *Rocket League*. This could well be a contender for one of the best games of the year.

FINGERPRINT

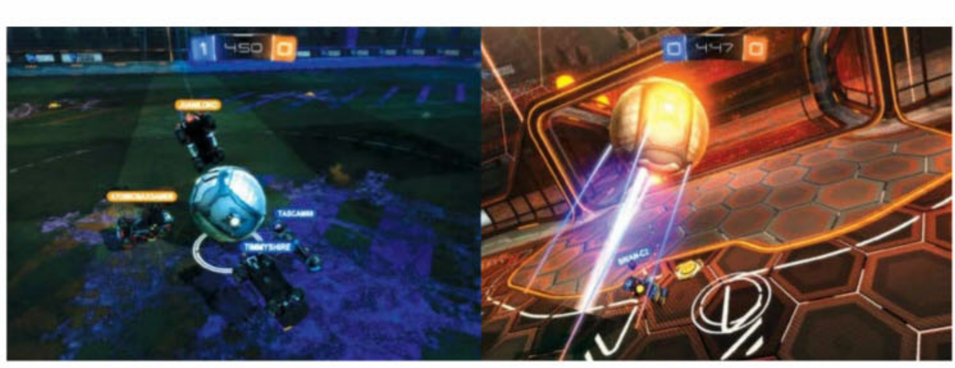
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM: Though the physics of the ball are a little floaty, it's all within the realms of control and once you master the boost-powered options it's possible to pull off some impressive shots.



Above: Developer Psyonix is already working on new maps, hopefully with a view to mix up the same cube-based arena that is currently present in every stage. All future maps will be released as free DLC.

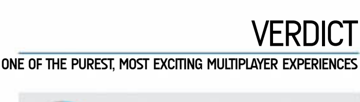


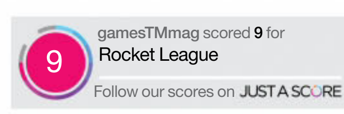


Above: There's a mad rush for the ball during kickoff that can often lead to unpredictable goals. Each bout starts with a sense of adrenaline.

VERDICT

ONE OF THE PUREST, MOST EXCITING MULTIPLAYER EXPERIENCES





TOKYO'S NEMESIS RISES THEN QUICKLY FALLS

Godzilla

The monster's initial appearance is impressive enough as it rises out of the ocean, but it's all pretty much downhill from there. Despite its aggressive entrance, Godzilla decides to wait patiently while the voiceover explains that Japan harnessed G-Energy, the mysterious force that gives Godzilla its strength, to power the world following its first appearance. It's not a great start.

There have been a *lot* of Godzilla games, many to be only found in Japan, which means that there are inevitably going to be a few duds in such a long line of releases. Unfortunately, this offering is one of those duds. In *Godzilla*, the beast is back and hungry for the aforementioned G-energy, conveniently stored in a number of easy-to-access generators. Your sole mission in God of Destruction mode is to destroy these generators by attacking them. The Japanese military aren't going to stand by and just let you destroy their main power source but they might as well do so as the constant barrage of bullets from tanks and helicopters does literally no damage.

The developers haven't even bothered to put a health bar on screen as there is such little chance of your character dying, so essentially it is a race between you tearing down the generators to grow your monsters and you getting bored and playing something else. Still, the controls are easy to get to grips with, even if Godzilla is a tricky beast to manoeuvre. However, its lack of mobility is really one of the only challenges in this mode. As you progress through God of Destruction mode, you battle monsters from Godzilla folklore, such as Hedorah and Mothra, but they're far too easy to defeat.

The only real fun comes in King of Kaiju mode, in which you battle a succession of increasingly tough monsters until you eventually die, and vs mode, where you have the chance to battle other players' monsters online. However, we were pitted against two characters at a much higher rank, so some kind of system where the game matches you with players of a similar level, like most online games, would be handy here. It is good fun to have some variety and if you look at it as an online fighting game, with the God of Destruction and King of Kaiju modes as training, the game at least has some merit.

But, graphically, it falls down as well; on numerous occasions we saw bodies get sliced in half by tails only to magically re-heal. The frame-rate suffered in Vs mode as well, which is obviously a frustration. Basically, *Godzilla* really doesn't have a lot going for it at all. Maybe this game should get back in the sea and wait it out for another 60 years.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER: Natsume Atari Inc
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-3
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN



BATTLE: LOS ANGELES

WORSE THAN



GOD OF WAR



Below: Godzilla's ranged attacks are impressive but ultimately it doesn't really matter what you do because you'll always win.

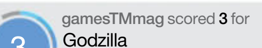
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

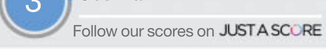
A CHALLENGE: We would have to add a timer into God of Destruction for some element of peril

LEVEL FIELD: Only match players with similar levelled players in vs mode to ensure a fair fight.

VERDICT



POOR GRAPHICS AND TEDIOUS GAMEPLAY



3 — gamesTMmag scored **3** for Godzilla

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



Above: It looks like it should be a fun if nonsensical time, but somehow smashing up a city becomes tediously routine.





Left: The campaign appears to offer terrific value for money at first, but there is no good reason to battle through it four times with each selectable character. The plot basically unfolds in exactly the same way, regardless of which character you choose.

SLAP SLAP SLAPDASH

J-Stars Victory VS+

A breezy and mechanically simplistic offering that occasionally entertains almost despite itself, *J-Stars Victory VS+* is fan service at its loosest and laziest. Part meandering, low-stakes adventure game and part rambunctious brawler, it's an outing defined by its incessant stop-start nature; a facet that illustrates that its ideal home is probably the PlayStation Vita.

The fighting game side of things offers up precisely the sort of chaotic slapstick antics one would expect, but the appeal wears off pretty hastily. This is principally because the hefty character roster (which includes folk from *Bleach*, *Naruto*, *One Piece* and *Dragon Ball*) is little more than a flock of analogous clones. Specials and combos aside, the moves are basically identical, and the tedious 50/50 choice between a brisk light attack and a slower guard breaker is about as deep as proceedings get. There are a few hours of rowdy, aimless fun to be had here, but investing serious time in something this flippant in its design is seldom a rich or rewarding process.

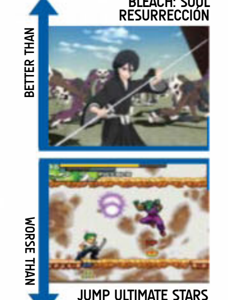
What's more, the adventure game side of the package fares considerably less well. Between bouts, you and your ever-shifting band of teammates traverse an isometric sea world (a pretty uninventive blend of locations from the various manga properties) until your progress is hindered by the requirement of a ship upgrade or the recruitment of an additional character. Everything outside of the brawling involves scrolling though inexplicably abundant banter (much of which is about food and dining, for some utterly bizarre reason) and travelling back-and-forth between barren areas until a fight finally breaks out. It's the kind of "content" that might have cut the mustard a decade ago, but now feels as if it were assembled by a computer on auto-pilot.

Fans looking for a more no-nonsense approach can enjoy both Arcade Mode and the decent online suite. Online matchmaking is mostly swift, with zippy netcode that handles all of the madness very admirably. Conversely though, split-screen co-op play is marred by clumsy framing.

Very young and very undemanding fans of shōnen manga may get a fleeting kick out of *J-Stars Victory VS+*, but there's too much cheaper (and superior) competition currently available across all platforms to warrant a half-hearted recommendation.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Playstation 4
OTHER FORMATS: Playstation 3, Playstation Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER: Spike Chunsoft
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



MISSING LINK

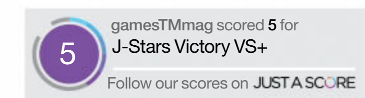
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

ROAD TO RECOVERY: The recovery system is employed too often during combat, granting your opponent a period of invincibility which throws combos out of whack. It slows proceedings down.



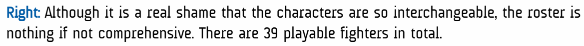
VERDICT

NOT AWFUL, BUT DISAPPOINTINGLY LAZY








Right: Although it is a real shame that the characters are so interchangeable, the roster is nothing if not comprehensive. There are 39 playable fighters in total.

'IMAGINE A WORLD WHERE THERE ARE NO HYPOTHETICAL SITUATIONS'

Steins;Gate

DETAILS

FORMAT: Vita
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PS3, PSP, iOS, Android
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: PQube
DEVELOPER: 5pb, Nitroplus
PRICE: £31.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
HATOFUL BOYFRIEND



AS GOOD AS
DANGANRONPA: TRIGGER HAPPY HAVOC

The visual novel is an interesting style of game – an ostensibly Japanese curio that's increasingly gaining traction in the mainstream (that is to say, outside of the hardcore JRPG/ anime audience). The terribly stylised *Steins;Gate* is a prime example of this – offering up enough of the genre's bizarre storytelling whilst being accessible to anyone that isn't really too au fait with the associated anime series, or visual novels in general.

You are Rintaro Okabe, a would-be mad scientist. This character deconstructs the archetype for the better; Rintaro Okabe isn't a wackily outrageous *Back To The Future* Doc or Krieger from *Archer*. He's more of a man that's been driven insane by time-travel and schizophrenia, a man so brilliant he reminds us of *Rick And Morty*'s titular professor more than any other genre rival. He can identify changes in the many timelines he jumps through, and using a microwave that can send messages back in time (yes, you read that correctly), he and his ragtag crew attempt to alter the future.

Now, this is an incredibly smart way for the visual novel to operate – it's reminiscent of the old *Fighting Fantasy/ Goosebumps* books of the early Nineties: you choose your own ending. Well, in a way. Because of the intricate temporal set-up of the story, your actions influence just about everything around you, and because most of the game is presented as a wall of text with supporting interactive artwork, the game can take you a lot further out of its main story than you'd expect.

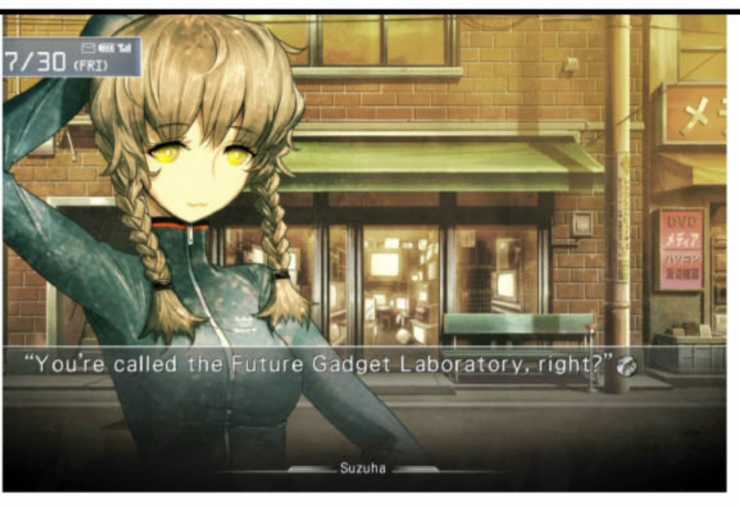
All in all, the story becomes a pretty heavy lesson in causality, touching on philosophical themes outlined by the likes of Heidegger or Schrödinger. Deny a phone call from a past version of one of your friends trying to help you out, and it could affect *anything* – from the 'you' of your timeline to the entire dimension you find yourself in at the time. It's all the best bits of *Danganronpa* but with a story concerned more with the butterfly effect than with detective mysteries.

It's slow, though, we can't deny that – the term visual *novel* is key here; it's not a visual *novella* or something. That, and the Japanese-only voice acting might deter some (and the *many* typos…) but it's a genuinely interesting story to try and wrap your head around, and a perfect game for the Vita, to boot. Even if you're not a fan of the sort of Japanese games that take their stories too seriously, we still recommend *Steins;Gate*. It's a curious entry that couples great art with a smart and self-aware approach to sci-fi narrative – that in itself is something to be celebrated in gaming, right?

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

IT'S ABOUT TIME: The way the game breaks down the standard trappings of the visual novel with its insular time-travel narrative embarrasses recent Western attempts (Moffatt, take note).



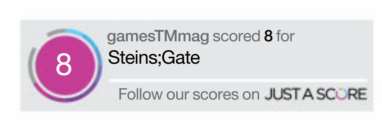
Above: The walls of text might put some players off, but if you've got the patience, there's a smart, bold story hidden behind the prose.



VERDICT



DOESN'T TAKE ITSELF TOO SERIOUSLY, VERY COMPELLING







Above: Whether it's supposed to be a comment on modern society's obsession with phones, or merely a plot device, the way mobiles are implemented into the story is fascinating.

Left: The slender customisation options are embarrassing but perhaps a good indicator of what to expect from the threadbare career mode, particularly if you play through Career on the default settings.

Right: Although it feels trickier compared to previous years, putting is actually easier once you get used to both the lines and the way elevated holes affects your shot.

GOLF WITH FAR TOO MANY LIMITS

Rory McIlroy PGA Tour

Is that it? What happened? Where did everything go? Those questions, and variants of them, are what you'll mutter to yourself in confused exasperation as you click around *Rory McIlroy PGA Tour*'s menus for the first time. EA's golfing series has taken a two-year vacation and returned without Tiger Woods and seemingly forgotten over half the luggage it left with too.

The reason for the extended absence is that EA's golf series now uses the Frostbite engine, and the new engine means no loading times, (barely) improved visuals and the introduction of some dazzling fantasy courses, the highlight being a flaming battleship which crashes onto the green. In the long-term, this will likely be a good thing for the series as it opens up more design possibilities but for this outing, the manpower and resources it took to change engines has caused *Rory McIlroy PGA Tour* to suffer elsewhere.

Most notably: this is a *really* slim package. Embarrassingly so, compared to the riches of *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 14*. The number of courses and golfers has been slashed. Career mode defaults to a handful of holes on each course with no significant distraction between them. The brilliant Country Clubs mode has been dropped entirely from the online side with no adequate replacement lined up. Character creation is just sad, with just a handful of faces, hairstyles and other options to play with.

The only real new feature of note is Night Club Challenge, a series of fantasy golf challenges that see you smashing glass plates, hitting the ball into portals for shortcuts, aiming for distant targets and so on. You unlock boosts as you progress, offering advantages such as mid-air boosts or sticky balls, with a maximum of three that can be taken onto the course with you. It's got the right balance of strategy and challenge, and there are a huge number of trials to get through. It's the one worthy addition to the series.

The golf itself is inoffensive enough and now offers a variety of control schemes, including a nostalgic three-click option for those old enough to remember the 16-bit days of the series, but the new engine offers little that *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 14* didn't. In fact, with some odd quirks such as the putting line occasionally disappearing and the game locking up just as you're about to tee off, it could even be argued that this offers less – and too many features have been stripped back in the meantime.

It should have been a cause for celebration that an EA Sports game review has forced us to abandon the well-worn 'It's like last year but slightly better!' template, yet *Rory McIlroy PGA Tour* is like two years ago but significantly worse. Not nearly good enough, especially for a game whose slogan is 'golf without limits'.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: EA Sports
DEVELOPER: EA Tiburon
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

AS GOOD AS: THE GOLF CLUB

WORSE THAN: TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 14

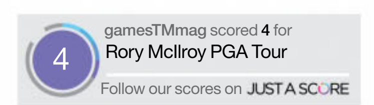
ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

NEW ENGINE: Switching to Frostbite means no loading times and physics improvements, such as when the ball hits the rough or obstacles in Night Club Challenges.

VERDICT

TOO MANY GOLF CLUBS MISSING FROM THIS BAG



REIGNITING OLD FLAMES

Devil May Cry 4: Special Edition

Just when you thought *Devil May Cry* had gotten confusing enough, Capcom decides to re-release an instalment first seen in 2008. Two and a half years ago this entire series was rebooted with a new variation of the lead character, a new development studio and a seemingly new path to capturing to a wider audience. Why now decide to take what could be considered a step backwards by asking players to once again warm to the old guard?

Whatever the reason, we're not complaining about the 'backwards' step. Occupying once again the boots of original Dante serves as a stark reminder as to just how important it is to concentrate focus on getting core systems right. The exploration elements here are tiresome, the puzzles wholly underwhelming and narrative devices that see you backtracking through the same areas annoying, but the combat is spectacularly engaging.

Admittedly, the initial impact is rather mute. Until you've gained enough levelling up points to unlock some of the more interesting attacks and skills, fights can feel repetitive. Certainly, this is what could be accurately described as a 'slow-burner' for the first couple of hours, but after that the potential for magic comes to the fore.

The pace is slightly slower than more modern games of this ilk, which can make long combo strings more difficult. But once you've mastered the linking of one attack into the next and memorised the movement patterns and animations governing your foes there's no reason not to dispatch entire rooms in a single flurry. Once you're far enough into proceedings to be given control of Dante, as opposed to the sulky Nero who begins the game, the door is suddenly thrown open and combat becomes a joy that is as complex or simple as you like it to be.

Should you tire of playing as guys with bleached hair you can take charge of the extended cast. From the start the entire campaign, complete with cut-scenes, is available to play using Vergil in isolation, or Lady/Trish in tandem. Vergil is less of a brute than Dante or Nero, excelling in powerful counter attacks and moving out of danger as soon as damage is dealt. Trish is all about speed, but loses out by way of raw power as a result. Lady is entirely different, favouring her long range weapons.

Each takes some getting used to, but we recommend that you finish the Dante/Nero campaign before tackling the others in order to properly understand how the core combat was originally designed to operate. All are worth playing, giving this package more replay value than most of its peers.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 4
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

THE DARK KNIGHT: With more characters and the impossibly difficult Legendary Dark Knight mode included, this is a significantly weightier package than the original. Set aside a couple of weeks..

BETTER THAN

DEVIL MAY CRY 2



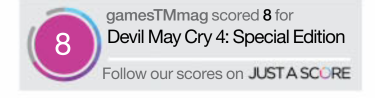


BAYONETTA

WORSE THAN

VERDICT

GENEROUSLY CELEBRATING A BEAUTIFUL FIGHTING SYSTEM



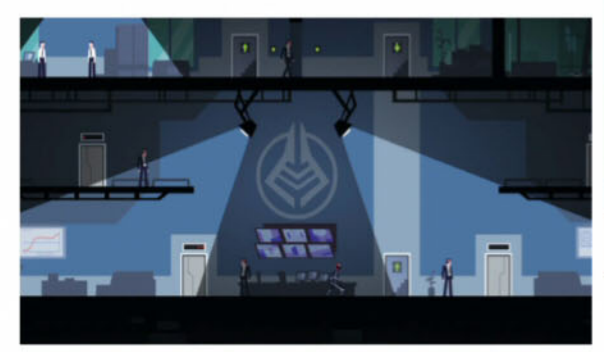




Above: You don't begin the game playing as him, but Dante is once again the star of the show. By the time you do take control of the series' most famous son you should be familiar enough with combat to unleash hell upon your enemies.

GENRE-HOPPING WITH A SWORD

Ronin





Above: Early levels ease you into the action incredibly softly, with it being almost impossible to fail at the hand of an enemy due to the way they tend to position themselves in areas of darkness.

Anonymous masked 'heroes' fighting against a seemingly all-powerful entity is hardly a new videogaming idea. Indeed, its continued popularity perhaps serves to prove that, at least when it comes to bloodthirsty rampages, it offers just enough narrative uncertainly to develop audience interest without getting in the way of the action. Such a path is only respected, however, if the game in question manages to line it with something resembling fresh intrigue.

It's here that *Ronin* immediately starts to struggle, the similarities with 2013's *Gunpoint* being, at times, so stark and obvious that you're at a loss to differentiate between the two. Guard patrols must be avoided, walls and ceilings stuck to, computers hacked and your mouse button used to jump. All of this within a near-future setting depicted from a 2D, side-on perspective. If you've played *Gunpoint* then all of that is going to sound familiar. If you haven't, take our word for it that these similarities exist.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4 (RELEASE DATE TBA)
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER: Tomasz Waclawek
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: 30 June 2015
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Intel Core Duo, 2GB RAM, OpenGL 3.0 compliant video card, DirectX9, 300MB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Where *Ronin* does set itself apart is in its combat. Unlike *Gunpoint*, skirmishes with guards are all but unavoidable - many of the game's distinguishing features are centred around how to kill, but not be killed. Levels are designed so that you must eventually step into the vision cone of a guard, triggering a turn-based fighting system that sees you micromanage actions that at full speed would take a second or less to execute. That's no bad thing, either, as there is a certain degree of exhilaration to be found in performing the perfect set of slick moves, chained precisely into one another, in what is effectively slow-motion.

You can jump around to narrow the distance and/or move position to avoid enemies' guns, but the length of a jump is limited in each turn. Careful planning of your position is essential in order not to be caught in the open when it's your foe's turn to shoot. After a while, combat becomes akin to a puzzle game, with the core conceit coming by way of how you manage to take out one guard without his friends ending you before you've done so.

Unfortunately, this 'puzzle' system doesn't have as much depth as you'd want - especially during later levels, with things finishing before they've really gotten started. There's a good idea here, presented in a way that is silly enough to be charming, but not dim-witted.

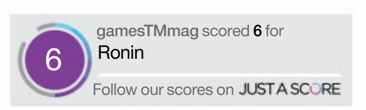
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

GENRE BLEND: A 2D, turn-based combat/stealth puzzler is an enormously interesting blend of genres and ideas, with the earlier levels coming across as something genuinely fresh.

VERDICT

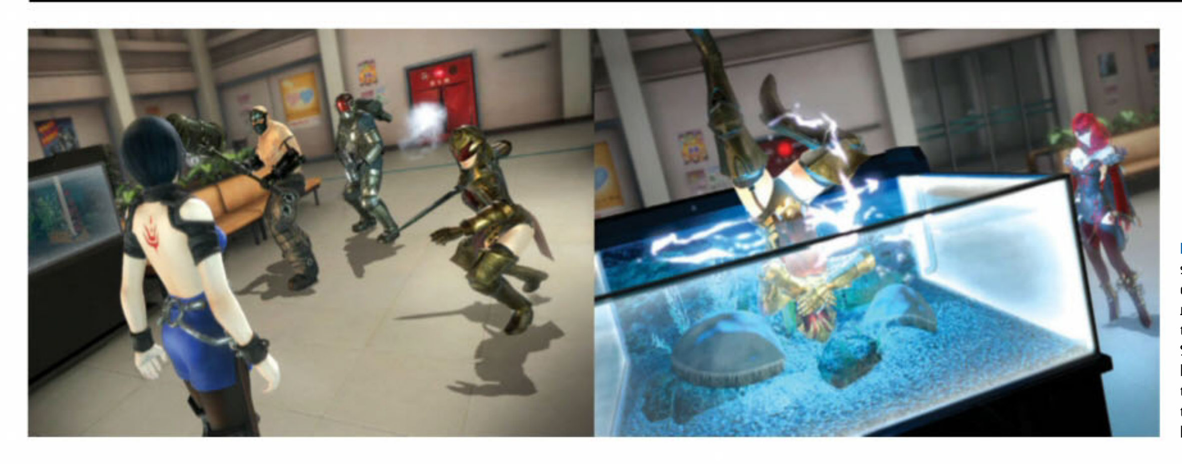
THE CENTRAL IDEA IS INTERESTING, BUT LACKS DEPTH



Below: If you find yourself in an enemy's sights at the end of a turn then your primary goal should be move out of the way immediately. A single shot will kill you and force you to restart the level.







Left: There are hazards strewn across each of the game's levels – ranging from the sadistic to the downright bizarre. Should you manage to bait your opponent over to them, you'll be treated to a sequence that is as hilarious as it is dark.

BEING BAD NEVER FELT SO MEDIOCRE

Deception IV: The Nightmare Princess

If there is one thing that the *Deception* series does well, it's making you feel fine with being bad. Its unique spin on the strategy RPG genre, by the way of using traps to kill enemies, makes *Deception* stand out as one of the more inventive series on the market. *Deception IV: Blood Ties* was no exception to this; however, due to its incessant repetition of level design and objectives, not to mention a lack of expansion on the *Deception* formula, the game failed to achieve its potential.

Enter a revised edition of *Deception IV*, named *The Nightmare Princess*. This updated version of the game contains the original *Blood Ties* game but it also features a new character, Valgyrie, with her own quest tree. Valgyrie plays differently to the original *Deception IV* protagonist, Laegrinna, in that she can actively participate in the game's nonsense herself. Before, as Laegrinna, after setting traps you were limited to walking around the playfield as live bait, making for tedious situations where you'd wait for enemies to walk towards you in the hopes they land on a tile that you've 'trapped'. Valgyrie, however, can dash, kick and stomp, enabling you to take a more pragmatic approach to vanquishing your prey. Valgyrie's 100 mission strong 'Quest Tree' is also a marked improvement over the linear story of Laegrinna's campaign, with various branching 'paths', each with their own story and objectives.

While these are all marked improvements over *Blood Ties*, *The Nightmare Princess* still falls short and suffers from a ridiculous amount of repetition. While watching your Rube Goldbergian machinations humiliate, maim and destroy your enemies is sure to crack an evil smile even amongst the most saintly of gamers, getting to that point is an uphill struggle. In order to unlock more traps, you have to fulfil special requirements in each quest. These require a lot of trial and error, but as the game progresses, the objectives become nigh impossible feats.

If you are willing to put a *lot* of time and effort in with *The Nightmare Princess* in order to unlock the more elaborate traps and levels, then you'll find a game which will perfectly scratch that sadistic itch. Otherwise, the game's shortcomings continue to botch a series we would otherwise love

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Tecmo Koei
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



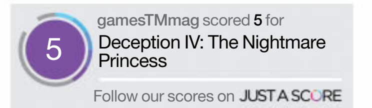
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SURPRISE ATTACK: Waiting for all of your traps to 'wind-up' in order to activate them is frustrating. The inclusion of a few instant-use traps will help Valgyrie defend herself.

VERDICT

STILL A GREAT CONCEPT, BUT NEEDS REFINEMENT





Above: The variety of traps that you can utilise is commendable. From rakes on the floor, to swinging hammers, to launch pads, there will certainly be something to suit your needs.

PSYCHO PATHS

Tales From The Borderlands: Episode 3: Catch A Ride

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC, Xbox 360, PS3, Mac, iOS
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £3.99 / Season Pass £13.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

GAME OF THRONES, EPISODE 2



WORSE THAN



LIFE IS STRANGE, EPISODE 3

This is one of the first times we've seen a modern Telltale game divert quite far away from the now-typical 'have a couple of choices' template it's been relying on. Depending on what choices you made in *Episode 2: Atlas Mugged*, you'll have an *incredibly* different experience in *Catch A Ride* – your timed, impulsive decision from last time will effectively dictate which character you play as for the bulk of the chapter.

But the discrepancies don't stop there – depending on what choices were made last time, your supporting cast of misfits and weirdos might also have their arcs fundamentally altered… since such different things can happen in different arcs, we have no idea how Telltale is going to deal with the vast array of world states available to you at the end of this episode… but we *do* know we're excited find out.

Having a voice nestled firmly inside his skull makes some of the personal bits of Rhys' story even more tense than they have any right to be in such a ludicrous sci-fi romp, but that he's so relatable in the midst of all this nonsense is just more credit to the stellar writing team. The inter-familial drama brought up with Fiona and Sasha, is impressive too – it's touching without being saccharine.

The art style remains a fantastic example of what Telltale's engine can do if it's realised properly, and continues to create a beautiful relationship with the *Borderlands* universe and its lore. Some of the callbacks to the expanded *Borderlands* lore really set off the latent Pandora-Nerd in us. A perfect return to form.

VERDICT

DIFFERENT FOR EVERYONE, YET STILL FANTASTIC



Below: *Catch A Ride* indeed – the narrative sniffing around Telltale does in Gearbox's universe never ceases to impress us





MOTHER OF DRAGONS!

Game Of Thrones Episode 4: Sons Of Winter

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC, Xbox 360, PS3, Mac, iOS
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £4 / Season Pass £12
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS, EPISODE 1



WORSE THAN

GAME OF THRONES, EPISODE 3

It's difficult making the *Game Of Thrones* series feel in-line with the TV show. It's the main point of the games – they use the same actors, timeline and universe as the TV version of George R. R. Martin's fiction and serve as an expansion of the universe.

Episode 4 seems to break out of the comfortable nook that the previous three episodes had carved out – this is the first time you meet Daenerys, except… she's cold and she's practically a dictator. It felt as if Telltale were using Daenerys more as a plot point, rather than an actual character with motives and an arc of her own.

The Telltale template remains in good shape (five arbitrary choices per episode have definitely changed this reviewer's playthrough enough from, apparently, everyone else's) but there are some more engine problems in *Episode 4* that just can't be ignored. For a game running this minimally, that's unacceptable on the PS4.



Above: It's a shame about how Telltale presented Daenerys, because her entire room looks amazing

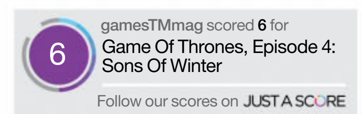


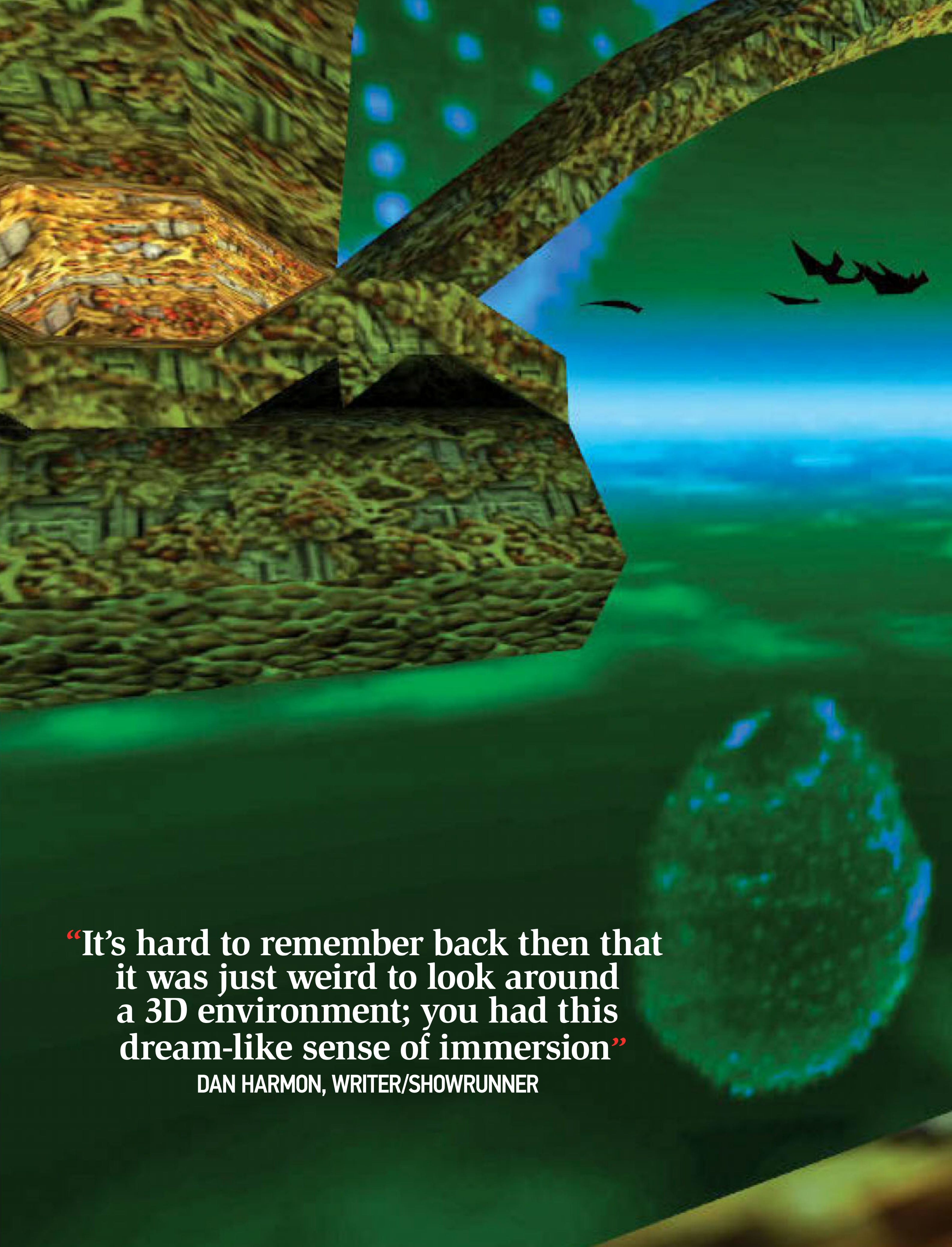
Above: For the first time, we preferred the supporting cast of the episode, rather than the central family of House Forrester

Episode 4: Sons Of Winter was the weakest of all the chapters so far. It's quite clearly setting up a lot of events that are going to get knocked down in the remaining episodes. It's a dip, but nothing that's not worth putting up with for the sake of the entire season.

VERDICT

WINTER ISN'T QUITE HERE YET





"It's hard to remember back then that it was just weird to look around a 3D environment; you had this dream-like sense of immersion"

DAN HARMON, WRITER/SHOWRUNNER



WHY I ♥...

HALF-LIFE

DAN HARMON, WRITER/SHOWRUNNER, COMMUNITY, HARMONTOWN, RICK & MORTY

“The most influential videogame of my life was Half-Life*. It was mind-blowing. I think it was the first game that actually hired a writer, you know, to craft a story. It really immersed you – it's hard to remember back then that it was just weird to look around a 3D environment; you had this dream-like sense of immersion. You're Dr. Gordon Freeman and you're just showing up for work, and the decision to never put a cutscene into that game – to always have your attention directed organically to where it needs to be… it makes you feel always in control, but always in a dream. You're figuring out things as you go, and it's all done so well, so, so well. Yeah, that game changed my life.”*

RETRO

NO.164

DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro on our dedicated forum **www.gamestm.co.uk/forum**

THE RETRO GUIDE TO...

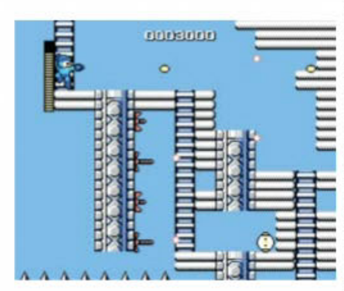


With Capcom announcing a brand new Mega Man compilation in the form of the Mega Man Legacy Collection, we felt the time was perfect to revisit the blue hero's diverse back catalogue

MEGA MAN REMAINS one of Capcom's biggest franchises, shifting over 30 million units since the first NES game was released in 1987. It's easily the company's most prolific franchise too, with over 100 titles, including sequels, spin-offs and remakes, but that also means it's not really that successful as some of Capcom's other franchises have smashed *Mega Man*'s sales with far fewer games.

Despite an often ferocious difficulty level, the *Mega Man* series has constantly endured. So much so in fact that when *Mega Man*'s artist, Keiji Inafune announced a spiritual successor called *Mighty No. 9* on Kickstarter it hit its target in just two days. Knowing we could never cover every game in detail in just six pages, we've instead focused on some of the most important. How many have you played?





MEGA MAN 1987

NES

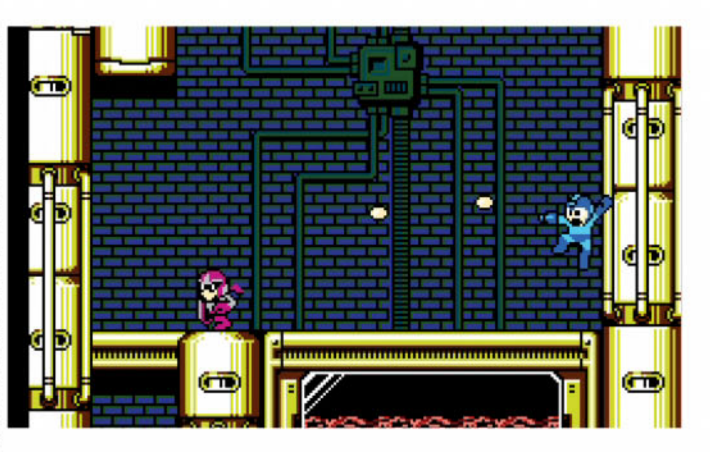
The original *Mega Man* introduced many of the key mechanics that would go on to define the series. It allows you to tackle the game's bosses in any order, rewards you with a unique weapon on defeating the level's boss, delivers deceptively cute-looking environments and sets up the age old battle between Dr Light (Mega Man's creator) and the evil Dr Wily. It also introduces you to the brutal difficulty level that would stay with the franchise for the following three decades. Oh and if you're wondering who created Mega Man's cute design, that was artist Keiji Inafune, who would go on to become the franchise's overseer.



MEGA MAN 2 1988

NES

Despite poor sales, Capcom allowed its staff to work on another *Mega Man* title. The gameplay was subtly tweaked introducing eight bosses to fight instead of the original's six and also granting the ability to refill Mega Man's energy at any time (providing you'd found an energy tank). Levels were themed to tie in more with the actual bosses, while two difficulty settings catered for both newcomers and fans of the original. The graphics have been suitably upgraded and feature some particularly big and beefy enemies, while the final showdown with Dr Wily has you facing off against all the bosses again, but in smaller areas. It went on to become the best-selling game in the franchise's history with over 1.5 million sales.



MEGA MAN 3 1990

NES

Mega Man's third outing was trickier than its predecessors due to the lack of a normal difficulty level, but it did boast great bosses. It's also the first game in the series to use the handy slide attack and introduces Rush, Mega Man's faithful transforming dog, along with new nemesis Proto Man.

MEGA MAN SPIN-OFFS

And you thought he just appeared in platform games…



MEGA MAN'S SOCCER 1994

SNES

If you thought a *Mega Man* football game was a terrible idea you'd be absolutely correct. There may be plenty of different gameplay modes to choose from, but the actual mechanics are pretty poor, thanks to clunky controls and some terrible AI on the opposing teams. We do like how you can add opposing robot players to your team as you defeat them, but that's about it.

MEGA MAN: THE POWER BATTLE 1995

ARCADE

Mega Man's first arcade outing is an odd one. It's split into three stories that cover *Mega Man 1-2, 3-6* and *Mega Man 7*. The stories themselves consist of battles between various bosses that are chosen via roulette. It's decent enough, but there's very little strategy to the actual battles due to a lack of moves across the three playable characters. A sequel appeared in 1996.



MEGA MAN BATTLE & CHASE 1997

PLAYSTATION

With *Mario Kart* proving so popular it was perhaps inevitable that Capcom would test the genre with one of its own mascots. The end result isn't atrocious but there's little to recommend it over Nintendo's series. While the handling of vehicles is sound, the track design and power-ups are rather bland. Interestingly, it never reached the US but it was released in Europe.

MEGA MAN 4 1991

NES

Some hardcore fans feel that instalment four of the *Mega Man* franchise is where the rot began to set in. This is largely due to the introduction of the Mega Buster, a new arm cannon that allows Mega Man to power up his blasts. We quite like its addition as it makes the game that little bit easier, but it wasn't received quite as well by fans who felt *Mega Man* was all about the challenge. Other solid additions include Flip Top Eddie who drops in new items for Mega Man and new support items that enable him to reach otherwise inaccessible areas.

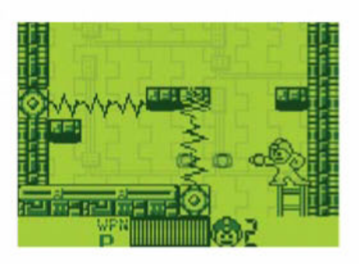


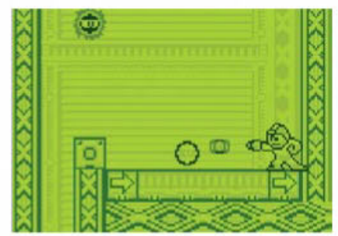


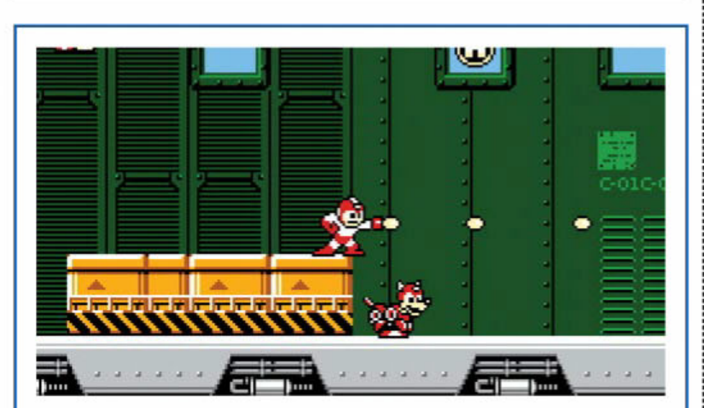
MEGA MAN: DR WILY'S REVENGE 1991

GAME BOY

'Average' is the best way to describe *Mega Man*'s first portable debut. It's effectively a remix of the early games, with four bosses from *Mega Man* and four from the sequel. It lacks the slide and charge moves and is also surprisingly tough too, making it ill-suited for newcomers to the franchise. The visuals look nice enough and the password system helps with the high difficulty, but that doesn't stop it from being the first weak game in the series.







MEGA MAN 5 1992

NES

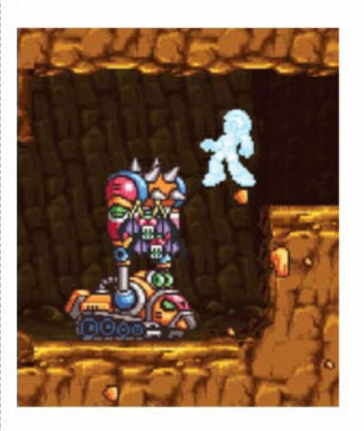
While it looks ace, *Mega Man 5* didn't exactly embrace originality, opting to use previous ideas and lacking any real innovation. There are new additions of course, but the ability to increase the width of your Mega Buster cements what many felt before: it's overly powerful and spoils the game. Still, the bosses remain fresh and imaginative, while the addition of Beat (a bird you'll receive upon collecting the words Mega Man) helps when the difficulty climbs.

MEGA MAN 6 1993

NES

The last *Mega Man* NES game is a fun one, mainly due to two new adapters for Mega Man. Jet Mega Man can hover and fly for short bursts at the expense of firing his charge canon, while Power Mega Man can't slide but can bash through rocks, which is rather handy. They're solid additions to Mega Man's arsenal and certainly make it a little easier than previous games. Unlike earlier games, the sixth outing is less linear than its predecessors and it's not as well polished, possibly due to Capcom also concentrating on Mega Man's first 16-bit outing.

"WHILE IT LOOKS ACE, MEGA MAN 5 DIDN'T EXACTLY EMBRACE ORIGINALITY"





MEGA MAN X 1993

SNES, PC

Mega Man's first 16-bit game is a great one, setting the tone for the many sequels that would follow. In addition to looking glorious, it introduces many new features. Mega Man (or X as this model is known) still can't jump, but he can cling to walls, dash and upgrade various parts of his body. The extra buttons of the SNES now enable you to switch boss weapons on the fly (you had to annoyingly pause the game on the NES) and it's even possible to jump into a new mech-like vehicle called the Ride Armor that enables you to punch down incoming enemies. It also continues to use the password system of previous games.

MEGA MAN X2 1994

SNES

X2 introduces the "X-Hunters", three Maverick Hunters, to the fairly convoluted storyline. The gameplay is largely similar to that of *Mega Man X*, but features a number of new vehicles that are usable on certain stages and slightly enhanced visuals. As with other *Mega Man X* games it wasn't a huge seller, meaning the Pal version of this SNES exclusive often goes for silly money.

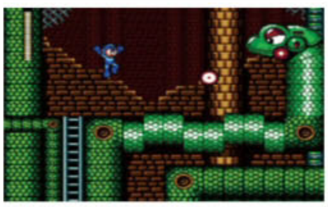


MEGA MAN: THE WILY WARS 1994

MEGA DRIVE

The Mega Drive didn't receive any original *Mega Man* games. Instead, it hosted *The Wily Wars*, an updated version of the first three games. In addition to greatly enhanced visuals, *The Wily Wars* features remixed music, a new battery save and dispenses with some of the glitches of the previous NES games. It also adds Wily Tower, which adds three unique bosses. Its rarity ensures it now fetches high prices on eBay.



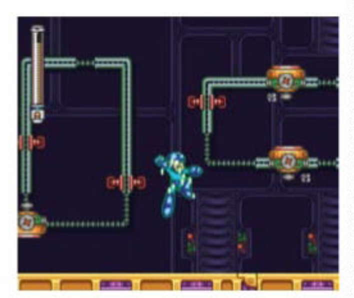


MEGA MAN 7 1995

SNES

The seventh *Mega Man* game is something of a disappointment. While it looks lovely with beautiful cartoon-like sprites, it just feels rather old fashioned after the excellent *X* games that Capcom had released. There's a decent range of bosses and some of the tunes are cracking but you can now only select from four bosses at a time, which seriously cuts down on your available path options. It plays fine, but it all feels rather bland, and unwilling to take risks.





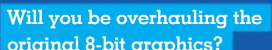
AN INTERVIEW WITH REY JIMENEZ

Mega Man Legacy Collection's producer talks Mega Man



So why focus on the first six *Mega Man* games and not the other four?

The philosophy of the game of preservation is key to this project. The developer we're working with has developed tech that can accurately reproduce the game from original content in a way that hasn't been used before. This tech is currently focused on building from NES content and this is why the collection is of the first six games, all of which released on the NES.



Will you be overhauling the original 8-bit graphics?

Although we are still displaying 8-bit graphics, they are now being re-output in 1080 HD. This means that the sprites will be super crisp and cleaner than we've ever seen before. As a comparison, *Mega Man Anniversary Collection* was running 240p, the original resolution, scaled up to 480, which is what TV resolutions were through the Nineties and the beginning of the Noughties. At the same time, we are offering some retro-style filters to emulate an old arcade monitor or an old tube TV. These modes may not speak to younger gamers, but to old farts like me, it's a very nostalgic thing to play *Mega Man* with that look.

How will the new Challenge Mode work?

This is a new mode that we're offering with this collection. Essentially, we've chopped up existing areas of *Mega Man 1-6* and we're rearranging them in new ways and adding a timer to them. The team have designed challenges that are tours of each game. Some are through their favourite parts of the game and others are themed. Along with leaderboards, replay, and the current-gen video share abilities; we're going to be seeing a new generation of speedrunners.

Will you be altering the difficulty for newer gamers?

Nope. We are not altering the games themselves in any way. We want them to be as difficult (or easy if you're that good) as they originally were.

Are you worried that compilations like *Rare Replay* make your collection seem like poor value?

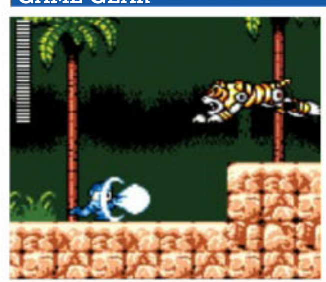
I am quite impressed with that title and I commend Rare for it. I can only speak for *Mega Man Legacy Collection* and knowing the amount of passion and heart that the team has invested into it, I'm confident in its value. In terms of pure numbers, currently the titles are available through the e-Shop for five bucks a pop. That's great if you're looking for an individual game, but *Mega Man Legacy Collection* will bring all 6 original 8 bit games for only €14.99.

Why do you think Mega Man remains so popular?

I think that, like most of our gaming icons that have endured, it's because he has a clean design that is memorable while also being cute. I have spoken to gamers that have never touched an *MM* game, but have tattoos, shirts, etc, because they like the design. He's undeniably special.

MEGA MAN 1995

GAME GEAR

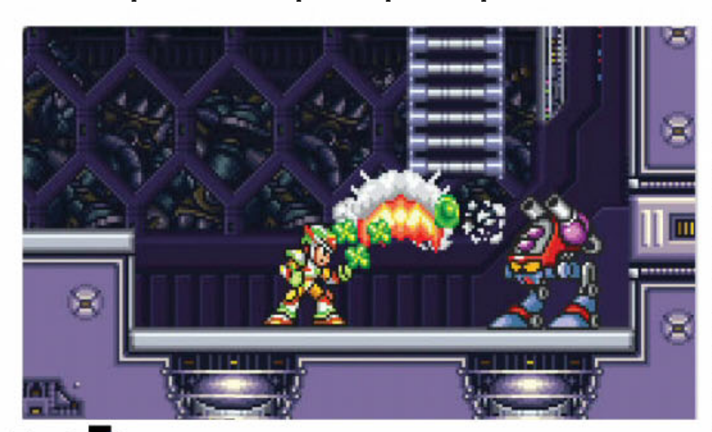


Like the original Game Boy and Mega Drive games, this is another remix, although this time it's based on *Mega Man 4* and *5*. While the visuals are quite nice and it introduces vertical scrolling, the cramped nature of the Game Gear's screen makes some jumps difficult to judge. The controls are quite sticky for a *Mega Man* game too, making it a frustrating experience.

MEGA MAN X3 1995

VARIOUS

The most notable change to *Mega Man X3* is that it introduces Zero as a new playable character (and rather powerful he is too). To keep him balanced, he's unable to pick up any of X's armour or power-ups and is also unable to battle bosses. *X3* is also the first *Mega Man X* game to appear on 32-bit consoles, with versions being available for the PlayStation and Saturn. As with Mega Man *X2*, *X3* uses Capcom's CX4 chip, which adds some basic 3D effects. It's also becoming increasingly rare on eBay due to a limited print run, particularly the Pal version.



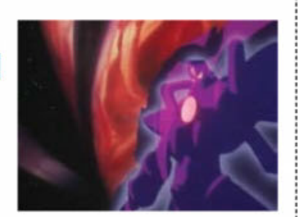


"MEGA MAN X3 IS INCREASINGLY RARE DUE TO A LIMITED PRINT RUN"

MEGA MAN 8 1996

VARIOUS

Mega Man 8 was the first classic *Mega Man* game to be released on a 32-bit console. While it obviously benefits massively from a complete graphical overhaul – including full-motion video cutscenes – it largely suffers from many of the issues of *Mega Man 7*. By far the best new addition to the franchise, however, is the ability to use multiple boss weapons simultaneously, which allows for plenty of strategy. Mega Man also has access to a cool new ball power-up that he can kick at nearby enemies. It's still a lot of fun, but isn't as engaging as previous entries.





MEGA MAN LEGENDS 1997

VARIOUS

It was never going to be easy translating *Mega Man* to 3D. Rather than attempt the impossible, Capcom instead created a new sub-series, which takes place in the same universe, but is thousands of years in the future. The new protagonist is Mega Man Volnutt and the game is actually a surprisingly slick arcade adventure with RPG overtones. While the 3D areas are lacking in detail and look fairly basic, the action itself is solid, thanks to a useful targeting system for combat and the ability for Mega Man to continually upgrade his Buster Gun with various upgrades. There's a large selection of characters to talk to and interact with; switches must be turned off to make progress in some of the maze-like levels; and there's a mission-like structure to the gameplay. A weak update was released for the N64 three years later.







MEGA MAN XTREME 2000

GAME BOY COLOR

This is another Capcom remix, taking aspects of the first two *Mega Man X* games but adding disappointing visuals and a brutally tough difficulty level. There's a nice little sub-plot that explains why you're essentially revisiting past games, but the clunky controls and poor collision detection makes it too much of a frustrating experience. The 2001 sequel, *Mega Man Xtreme 2* fairs little better and should be equally avoided.

MEGA MAN BATTLE NETWORK 2001

GAME BOY ADVANCE



This interesting spin-off cashed in on the Pokémon craze by turning Capcom's series into a tactical role-playing game. You control a young child called Lan Hikari in the real world and use Mega Man whenever you enter the world's internet. It's a fun concept, largely thanks to the excellent and robust combat system, which is deceptively deep when you get into it.



MEGA MAN X7 2003

PLAYSTATION 2

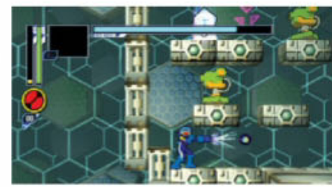
Kudos to Capcom for mixing the series up, but *X7* simply doesn't work. It combines the traditional side-on action of past *X2* games with new 3D sections, but they're too clunky and frustrating, even with a useful lock-on attack. Newcomer Axel has a cool ability called Copy Shot, which lets him transform into the enemies he's destroyed, but it's not enough. Its lukewarm reception saw Capcom drop the 3D gameplay mechanics for 2004's *Mega Man X8*.

MEGA MAN ZERO 2002

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Popular character Zero is the focus for this fun spin-off series. It's largely similar to *X* in its structure, but features an interconnected overworld that allows you to approach many of the game's missions in whichever way you want. A new addition to the franchise is the addition of elemental chips that are received from defeating bosses. Cyber Elves are also new, and can temporarily or permanently enhance Zero's abilities. Three sequels followed.





MEGA MAN NETWORK TRANSMISSION 2003

GAMECUBE

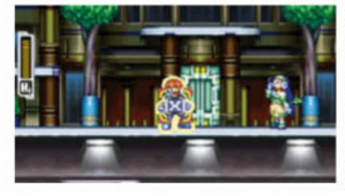
This interesting experiment was an attempt to combine the battling of the earlier Game Boy Advance game with more traditional *Mega Man* platforming mechanics. While the cel-shaded visuals suit the series, the high difficulty spikes do little to make it appeal to those that would have enjoyed *Battle Network*. There are certainly some fun bosses to encounter and the integration of the Battle Chip system is sound, but it remains an average game that adds very little to the series.

MEGA MAN ZX 2006

NINTENDO DS

Mega Man ZX introduced the choice of whether to play as female Aile or male Vent. These humans can transform by using one of eight elemental-based Biometals. Although they are immensely powerful, you'll still need to change back to human form at some points to gain the trust of certain NPCs. *ZX* is a solid adventure, even if it fails to properly utilise the DS's second screen.







MEGA MAN STAR FORCE 2006

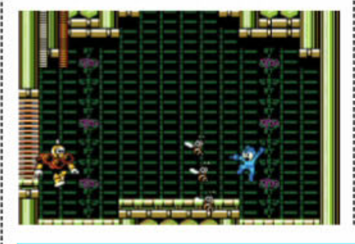
NINTENDO DS

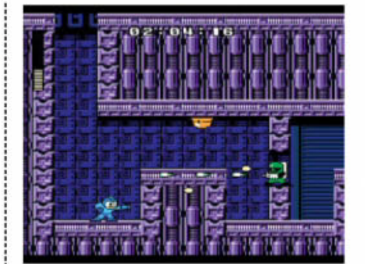
There are three games in the *Star Force* series and they share many similarities with the *Battle Network* games. There are few references to earlier *Mega Man* games and the battle area has been expanded from a 3x3 grid to a 3x5 one. The combat is actually more simplified compared to the *Battle Network* releases and each game has three different versions to encourage trading with others. Despite decent critical acclaim, the series wasn't a success for Capcom.

MEGA MAN 9 2008

VARIOUS

After a 12-year break, Capcom decided to return to its original *Mega Man* franchise with the ninth game in the series. It retains the original graphical style of the earlier NES games adds time attacks and challenges, but drops the slide mechanic and the ability to charge Mega Man's Mega Buster. It's a great little addition to the series, remaining challenging, but never frustrating to play.





MEGA MAN 10 2010

VARIOUS

Like *Mega Man 9*, Capcom's last classic Mega Man game is a downloadable title. It retains the same graphical style and Proto Man is an alternate character again. It also features several difficulty levels that greatly alter the levels' layouts, damage and enemy AI, ensuring plenty of longevity for those that love a tough but fair challenge.

MORE MEGA MAN GAMES

- MEGA MAN II (1991) GAME BOY
- MEGA MAN X4 (1997) VARIOUS
- ROCKMAN & FORTE: CHALLENGER FROM THE FUTURE (1999) WONDERSWAN
- MEGA MAN X5 (2000) VARIOUS
- ROCKMAN BATTLE & FIGHTERS (2000) NEO GEO POCKET COLOR
- MEGA MAN LEGENDS 2 (2000) VARIOUS
- MEGA MAN BATTLE NETWORK 2 (2001) GBA
- MEGA MAN BATTLE CHIP CHALLENGE (2003) GBA
- MEGA MAN ZERO 2 (2003) GBA
- MEGA MAN X8 (2004) VARIOUS
- MEGA MAN X COMMAND MISSION (2004) GAMECUBE
- MEGA MAN ZX ADVENT (2007) NINTENDO DS
- ROCKMAN XOVER (2012) IOS

BEHIND THE SCENES



It may not have taken one thousand and one nights to make but Magic Carpet's open world swept gamers away. games™ talks to its developers

Released: 1994
Format: DOS, PlayStation, Saturn
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Developer: In-house
Key Staff: Sean Cooper, lead programmer, Glenn Corpes, programmer, Barry Meade, level design, Alex Trowers, level design, Finlay McGechie, artist, Russell Shaw, music, Les Edgar, project manager

WHAT COULD POSSIBLY surpass the joy of creating a graphically stunning open world? For those who worked on *Magic Carpet* – Bullfrog's classic first person 3D rug-rider – it was seeing the game being enjoyed on the other side of the world. The game was featured in a few episodes of Australian soap opera *Neighbours* when character Karl Kennedy got the title. It may not have made for a gripping storyline but it certainly struck artist Fin McGechie. "I remember the excitement," he says, tongue-firmly-in-cheek. "That's when I knew we'd made it."

The idea for *Magic Carpet* flew out of the mind of Bullfrog programmer Glenn Corpes in 1991. *Populous II* had been released for the Amiga and the Atari ST, and Corpes had been playing around with PC graphics. "I'd coded some basic 3D on the ST and Amiga in one of our previous games, *Powermonger*, but the PC was a far more exciting prospect," he says. "It could draw well over 20 times as many polygons as the machines I'd been used to. From somewhere I picked up how to do Gouraud shading, where each corner of a triangle blends to a different shade. I'd knocked up a 'flying round a landscape' demo using the fractal landscape generator from *Powermonger*, which used an algorithm described by Mike Singleton in a magazine interview about the ST game *Midwinter*. Things grew from there."

A while later, Corpes saw id Software's FPS *Wolfenstein 3D*. He also spotted screenshots of the first-person RPG *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* in a magazine and the combination of the two inspired him. "I realised that texture mapping was arguably just 2D Gouraud shading, at least from the perspective of writing the texture mapper," says Corpes. "This meant that the landscape of what I'd produced could now start looking like an actual landscape."

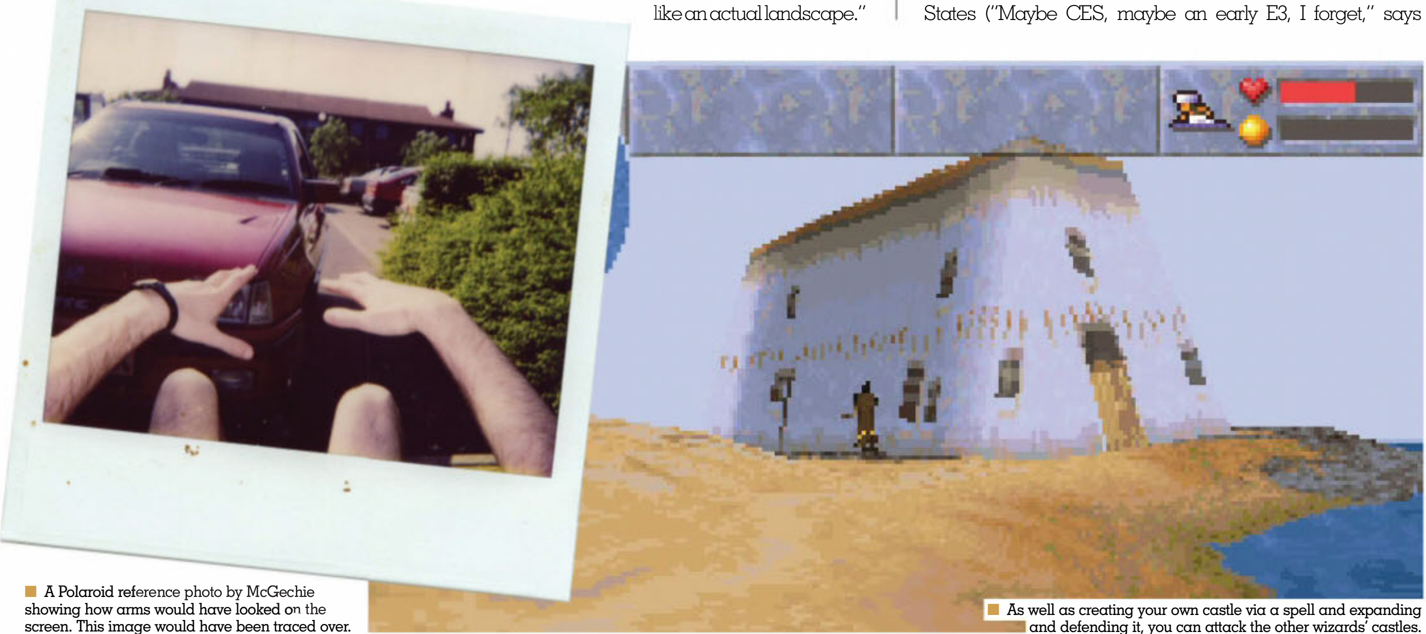
The basics of a game were starting to come together. As well as producing a couple of games that were distributed on the cover discs of magazines – *Bullfrogger* and *Psycho Santa* – Bullfrog was also paying a lot of attention to a real-time tactical shoot-em-up called *Syndicate*. It was the way the company worked, juggling a few balls together at the same time. But the company didn't lose sight of what would become *Magic Carpet*, only at first there was no carpet at all.

"We had something where the player could fly around what was a very pretty landscape for a time but that was all," recalls Corpes. "Yet nobody at Bullfrog was a flight simulator fan and my personal take on flight sims is that you normally watched little more than a horizon and fired missiles at targets that never got more than a few pixels across. We needed something where you didn't fly too high or shoot guided missiles. Someone, I think it was Peter Molyneux [Bullfrog's co-founder], suggested a magic carpet. This gave us something to aim for and I started writing the game."

Development proceeded slowly at first – "I'm very lazy and easily distracted by interesting technical problems," says Corpes – but a fun and fast game began to emerge, even though it was rather different from the title that players would eventually see. "You could see a pretty long way, there was a guy on a billowing carpet on the screen and dragons emerging from caves to attack you," explains Corpes. "It was also pretty directionless."

"Before we decided on what playing perspective we were going with, we had a couple of arms on screen, floating," recalls McGechie. "We then changed to having it third-person so you could see your character. I recall Peter mentioning to someone that we could have some motion capture on the character and rotoscope an infinite amount of frames on it, and this worried me no end as it would have expanded the workload to a level I wasn't keen on. But due to some issues with having a character on screen bouncing into landscapes and fireballs coming from behind the screen, we decided to go with a clean first-person screen to maximize the playing area, which worked a treat."

When Molyneux arrived back from a show in the United States ("Maybe CES, maybe an early E3, I forget," says



A Polaroid reference photo by McGechie showing how arms would have looked on the screen. This image would have been traced over.

As well as creating your own castle via a spell and expanding and defending it, you can attack the other wizards' castles.





IT'S MAGIC!

There were a total of 24 game-enhancing spells in Magic Carpet



FIREBALL
■ Sends a fiery, usually ineffective, missile at creatures and buildings.



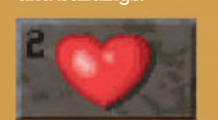
POSSESS
■ Needed in order to take charge of a ball of mana and generate power.



ACCELERATE (FORWARDS)
■ Sends you moving rapidly ahead at 4x speed.



CASTLE
■ To store mana, a castle needs to be created using a spell.



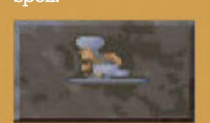
HEAL
■ Damaged by the many monsters? It is time to mend thyself.



REBOUND
■ To deflect incoming fire-based spells, and send them straight back.



SHIELD
■ Reduces the amount of damage felt by being hit by a spell.



INVISIBLE
■ When all else fails, hide for a short while with a spell of invisibility.



EARTHQUAKE
■ A devastating but pretty effective ground-shattering spell.



CRATER
■ Like Earthquake, but creates a hazardous hole in the ground.



METEOR
■ The spell you want for maximum carnage on a widespread scale.



VOLCANO
■ Let the lava spew out to damage monsters and castles.



LIGHTING
■ Keep holding down and send bolt after bolt with precision.



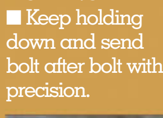
LIGHTNING STORM
■ A longer-lasting version of Lightning in a sense.



UNDEAD ARMY
■ Need to attack a castle? Get these spooky underlings in to do the dirty.



MANA MAGNET
■ Gather up more mana in the quickest possible time.





STEAL MANA
■ If a wizard has what you want, you can simply take it away.



BEYOND SIGHT:
■ When rivals invoke the Invisible spell, Beyond Sight reveals them.



DUEL
■ For when you want an enemy wizard stationary and in your sights.



TELEPORT
■ Instantly go to your castle or the point of your first spell.

WALL OF FIRE
■ Produces a flame-filled barrier that is actually easy to get around.



ACCELERATE (BACKWARDS)
■ Like accelerate but it sends you in the other direction.

GLOBAL DEATH
■ When you need to kill many enemies, this dishes out multi-directional death.



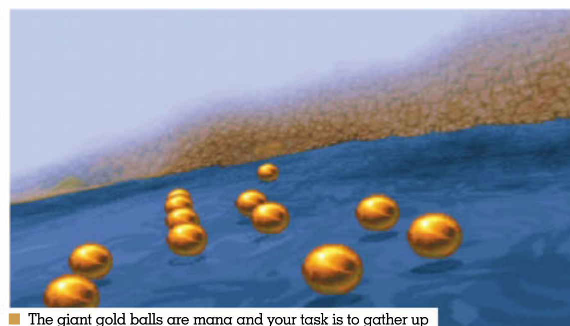
RAPID FIREBALL
■ Keeps sending out speedy little fireballs, one after another.

Corpes), the boss was adamant that Bullfrog "needed a *Doom*". By this point, *Syndicate* had been released, which had freed up programmer Sean Cooper. He was assigned to bolster the *Magic Carpet* project by Bullfrog co-founder Les Edgar and get it moving, so a deadline was set. "Les wandered in from the front room of the building we were currently occupying and I was working on a speech program to allow us to use speech in games," says Cooper. "He just said, 'We need to get this game out', and they bounced some large figures at me to get it done. I was easily bribed and as most people knew, nothing was going to stand in my way."

Cooper became director, designer and programmer for the game but when he first saw it, it was "just a landscape and a man on a carpet and I wasn't really impressed by it at all". Yet he already had a vision of what the game would be – "Not in it's entirety, but the skeleton, so 60 to 70 per cent of the game," he says – and one of the first decisions was to scrap everything except the graphic engine that Corpes had worked on. It was replaced with the code base that had been used for *Syndicate*.

Cooper says this brought in solid AI systems and made it easier to implement content. "Sean worked with my engine but chose to throw out my entity management system," adds Corpes. "This was slightly irritating at the time as I still maintain that my stuff was faster but, to be fair, it was harder to work with and Sean's saner system proved easily fast enough."

■■■ McGechie was on board to create the graphics and part of the solution was for him to hand draw the reduced tile set which amounted to a few hundred and make sure that every tile worked at every orientation. McGechie also had to assist with optimising the renderer. "I knew from the start that I would be wise to hover around Glenn's desk and see what he would be creating,



■ The giant gold balls are mana and your task is to gather up as many of these as you can to allow for more powerful spells.



■ Apes and trolls lumber around the landscape as they try to knock you off your stride and damage you.



Get these in a swarm and your health starts depleting pretty rapidly unless you have your wits about you.

WHAT THEY SAID...



In every department, Magic Carpet is a quality and engrossing release. The only disappointing feature is that there's no link-up option or two-player game – which was one of the best features in the PC version

Sega Saturn Magazine, 1996

allowing me to get a sense of the scope and scale of what would be possible in the engine," says McGechie. "It became apparent that what Glenn was producing was way ahead of anything I had seen before. He would be throwing up and distorting the landscape, flying over seas all at a very decent rate which at its core was a great starting point for design to run with."

Within a week, the *Syndicate* code was running on top of Corpes' engine. "Corpes had kindly written some functions for me to interface with and the biggest, greatest function call was AltitudeAt," explains Cooper. "This function would drive how the AI would move, the placement of items, the flight path, the devastation and so on. There was also a function to change the landscape to rock. The AltitudeAt function was like the Holy Grail. My whole vision could be realised with this one function."

Early on, the direction swayed. "I have a few memories of the early stages from when it almost went steampunky and away from the *Arabian Nights* look – some brief head shaking from Peter got us back on course," McGechie says. Some of the team also struggled with 3D. "A few had varying levels of skill in 3D, mainly because it was relatively new at the time," adds McGechie. "And with the way Bullfrog worked with the need to get stuff done, they didn't have the luxury of having enough time to get to grips with it."

The quick turnaround meant there was little redesigning of the assets. "Stuff was requested from Sean, design, myself or Peter and we would create a placeholder so code could get it in and then we replaced it when the appropriate asset was created," explains McGechie. "A lot of the design was on the fly, as there was never any 'bible' to follow."

But some of the graphics caused problems for McGechie. He would have to spend a few all-nighters tidying up artwork by hand to ensure everything fitted within the palette. "I built and rendered a crab and a palm tree in 3D Max, which Glenn then drew over by hand, I think that was about it for me," says Mark Healey, who worked on graphics and art concepts for the game.

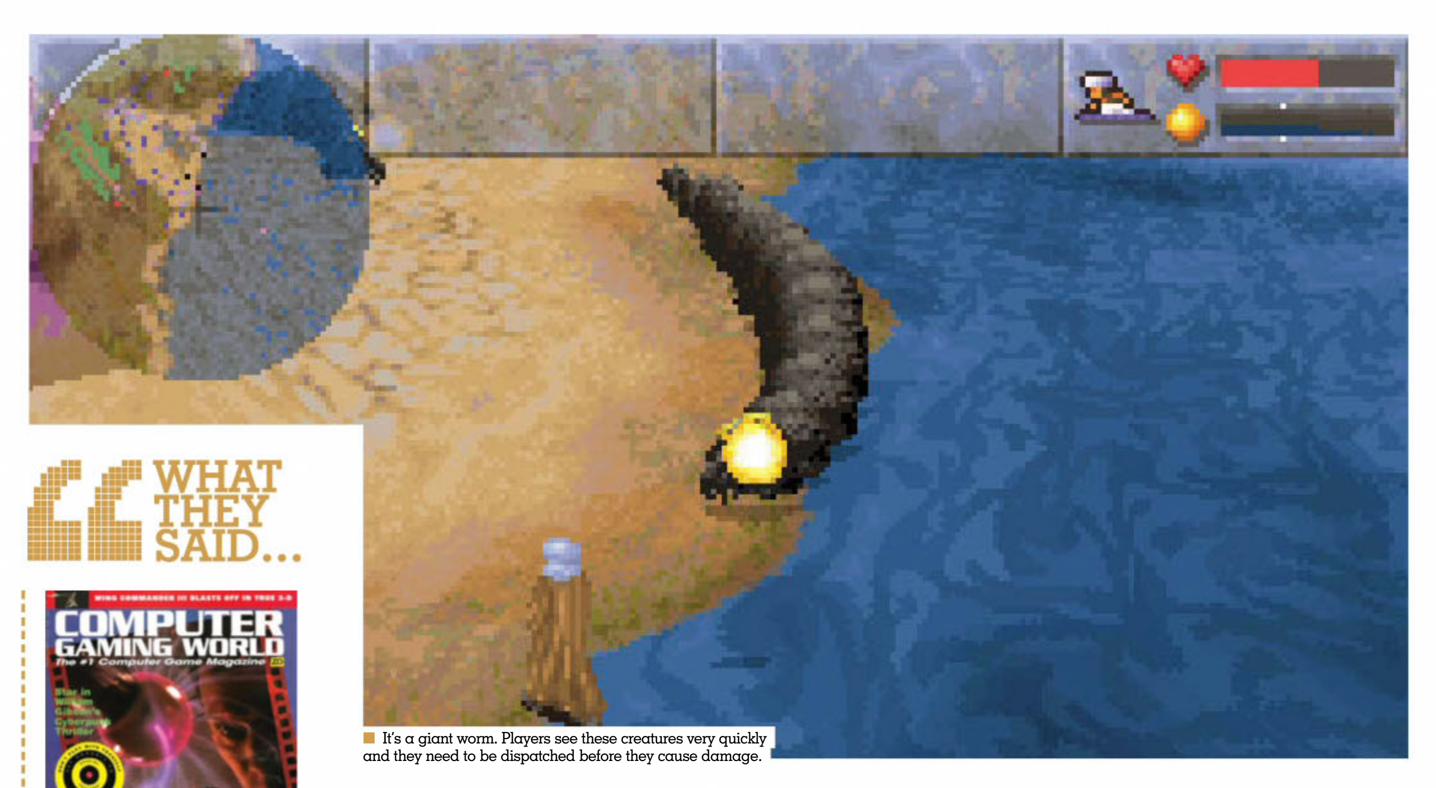
Some visual aspects also split opinion. "Someone had the bright idea of doing the whole front-end menu system visually with no text which caused no end of arguments," says McGechie. "Luckily there weren't too many options available so that was a blessing but I remember it being a bit of a panic to get something together."

Still, there were also some nice tricks for texturing, coloured lighting and fog. "The lighting was just a single pre-calculated table which worked for both fogging, which is blending towards the sky colour, and shadows, which is blending towards black," says Corpes. "I remember McGechie spending a lot of time painstakingly picking the best colours for the job. We then went on to abuse the colour palette even harder by adding translucency effects, something unheard of at the time."

I WOULD NAME MY CHARACTER '.' TO MAKE ME HARDER TO SPOT. THIS WAS DEEMED 'CHEATING'

The game was building up nicely towards what *Magic Carpet* would become. Players were asked to identify themselves ("I would name my character '.' to make me harder to spot on the map. This was deemed 'cheating' by bad losers," says Corpes) and they would eventually come to navigate 50 levels, flying around at speed, casting spells and killing enemies, ranging from giant worms, apes and genies to crabs and skeletons.

The spells would allow for some extreme weaponry – there were fireballs, meteors and lightning bolts – and they could also be used for defence. "I remember as Sean added more weapons to the game being appalled by how much he misused the system," says Corpes. "For

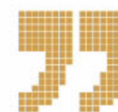


It's a giant worm. Players see these creatures very quickly and they need to be dispatched before they cause damage.

WHAT THEY SAID...

Magic Carpet provides a wonderful blend of first-person shooter and strategy game. You'll need both eye-hand coordination and resource management skills. […] Captured by its spell, Magic Carpet will keep you busier than a Sorcerer's Apprentice.

Computer Gaming World, 1995



example, some of the effects used several hundred animating explosion sprites and slowed the frame rate to a crawl but, as 'the engine guy' I'd been used to this for a while, the same could certainly be said of *Powermonger* and *Populous II*."

Some of the spells also altered the terrain and it was possible to erect castles too. "I think I experimented with making small tents out of the landscape," Corpes says. "Fin remembers me making castles but I'm not so sure. Making buildings out of the landscape was a ridiculous idea that forced the scale to change and effectively bought the draw distance in from 400 metres to just the 40 or so in the final game."

Collecting balls of mana was essential to gain power and expand the castles and these were snapped up when enemies were destroyed or by stealing them from other wizards. It was a game of world domination and it also offered a multiplayer mode for added competitiveness. "The castles were Barry Meade's idea," says Cooper, who was 24 years old during the game's development. "We were trying to come up with an idea of how to store the mana in the world."

The game took shape pretty quickly from this point and it would take just under four-and-a-half months from beginning to end. Cooper was driven by creation and money – he stood to gain more than a year's salary at the end of the project, and have another game under his belt. "I gave up my life to work on it," he says. "There were no clubs, pubs or women during this period, as the fun was starting working on a new project."

Alex Trowers, Sean Masterson, Daniel Russell and Jonty Barnes assisted with the level designs. "The whole company contributed to the design – it was the Bullfrog way and it should have remained that way through time," says Cooper. "But myself, Barry and Alex really took it to the next level. The multiplayer on a fast network was in and we were having fun playing a primitive version of the game in four-player. I had a dream of 16 players but my code design was not built for it, I spent a lot of time on the re-syncing code and we added landscape-affecting, devastation and mana-gaining spells."

The amount of mana was dependent on the achievements of the player. The bigger the explosion, the more mana was collected, for instance. A formula had to be worked out which created linear points to volume and the team relied on Glenn and the other mathematicians to come up with a solution. "Glenn really supported me," says Cooper. "This is when Barry suggested a castle. At the time I probably shouted and got all frustrated because

A LOT OF THE DESIGN WAS ON THE FLY, THERE WAS NEVER ANY 'BIBLE'

it wasn't in the plan but Glenn and the art team worked out a way to do it – we'd have balloons to collect the mana. Now the gameplay was solid."

To assist players as they navigated the landscape laid out before them, a decision was made to have a circular map in the corner. This was created by Corpes who also added animated water with reflections and variable translucency for the creature and particle rendering. But the look of the game was not entirely down to the artists. "These days the look of a game is almost entirely the work of artists," he says, "but back then the most interesting results came from an unholy alliance of programming and artists who could not only draw but also work strange systems designed to do a specific job, possibly in a very obscure way."

Eventually, Corpes turned his attention to another Bullfrog game, *Dungeon Keeper*, and yet he did move

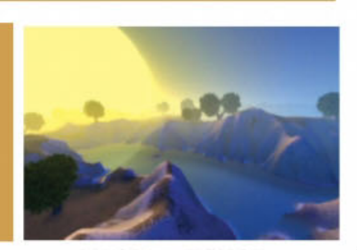
> GAMING EVOLUTION Doom > Magic Carpet > Arcane Worlds



Doom was in *Magic Carpet*'s marketing. "BFG=BFD" it read. The former a *Doom* weapon; the latter 'big f***ing deal'.



Arcane Worlds is in early access form and rough around the edges. Directly inspired by *MC*, it's about flying, fighting, and mana.



back on to the *Magic Carpet* project from time to time, "adding a few silly features that didn't really effect the guys making the game". He explains: "I added 3D support for a couple of LCD shutter glasses and several VR headsets. One of these, Virtual IO, paid $1,000 cash and two bottles of expensive tequila. This deal didn't go through EA at all but straight to me and Mark Lamport who snuck the support in a few weeks before the game was finished. I also added support for Red/Cyan 3D glasses that shipped in the box and even made the game sort of playable in a stereogram mode. I say 'sort of' because I totally screwed up the maths but you could still sort of see it."

Some time after the game was released, the BBC programme *Tomorrow's World* showed what it claimed was "the world's first animated stereogram". "It implied that I'd managed to unknowingly create not only the world's first animated stereogram but also made it interactive and sneaked it into a mass market product," Corpes laughs.

The game hit shop shelves in 1994 on the PC and it was well received by reviewers who enjoyed its cutting edge graphics, fluid 3D and absorbingly complex gameplay. It was little surprise for the Bullfrog team which had "played the hell out of the game over and over, to not only find bugs but to ensure that it played well and was fun – something that Bullfrog always did which helped create a closeness with the game and the team and in turn making sure that the game was the best it could be," says McGechie.

Magic Carpet was later ported to the PlayStation and Sega's Saturn, with each containing the same jaw-dropping animated introduction as the DOS original, unveiling the backstory and lending extra polish to an already well-honed game. "It was primarily created by Chris Hill who had the best knowledge of 3D at that time," says McGechie. "We knew what elements we wanted to include and we had Eoin Rogan on the intro doing the 2D book imagery too. But Chris put the whole thing together and managed that aspect of the game which was great for me as I could then focus my attention on making sure all in game assets were in and working."

The console versions were not as critically acclaimed although they still achieved reasonable scores. The control method was often seen as fiddly and difficult although it was widely accepted that the ambition and scope of the game was evident. This pleased the team and made their efforts worthwhile. "Sean, Peter, Glenn and, on occasion, myself and others would shout and swear loads during the game's production and by today's standards it would be 'unacceptable' or deemed aggressive," says McGechie. "But it was the way it worked: people spoke their minds and had the passion to follow it through and I don't think we would have got a lot of what we did done if we didn't."



PULLING THE RUG

Amiga gamers never did get to see Magic Carpet

■ IN APRIL 2012, some images appeared to have been found of an Amiga version of *Magic Carpet*. Screens were uploaded on to the English Amiga Board and it caused a mix of excitement and scepticism until Glenn Corpes put the record straight: the game was never earmarked for the Amiga, even though Bullfrog had long been an Amiga-first developer. Times were changing. "I suspect what happened is that a journalist [from CU Amiga magazine] visited the office and someone (possibly even me) implied that it might be possible on CD32 as it had a byte-per-pixel mode or a chunky to planer converter or something didn't it?," he told the forum. "My replies probably just made a few people sad," he tells us. The game *was* later ported to the PlayStation and Sega Saturn.





■ The PC version of the game looked and played much better than the console ports.

■ *Big Red Racing* allowed Paul Ranson's company, also called Big Red, to make a successful move to 3D.

SMART AND CHEEKY

"■■■ WE FIRST MET back in about 1988 at Codemasters, when his small team Big Red were writing 8-bit games. He was smart, cheeky and very resourceful, always quick to see solutions where others only saw problems. He offered to produce several *Dizzy* games, seeing the sales potential and Richard and David gave him a producer role at Codemasters. He was quick to develop procedures to improve efficiencies and clarity for all departments."

PHILIP OLIVER





INTERVIEW PAUL RANSON

Never slow to spot an opportunity, Paul Ranson has produced some of the UK's most iconic games. From Dizzy to Seymour, he tells all to **games™**

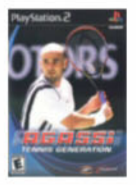
SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Dizzy: Prince Of The Yolkfolk (1991) Project director



Wild West Seymour (1992) Producer



Agassi Tennis (2002) Head of production

When did games start to interest you?
Oh, crikey, it's a very long time ago now. My dad got me an Atari 2600 originally and me and my brothers played it to death. I loved *Pac-Man*, *Space Invaders* and *Tanks* and I also remember being influenced by the original version of *Tron*. I really wished I could get into them from that point on. To play cutting-edge games, you had to go down to the arcade and they were pretty grubby places at the time, but the console changed that.

How did you learn to program?
I really wanted a Spectrum but my dad thought I should have a computer with a real keyboard so I got a Dragon 32 which, if I am honest, he bought for my middle brother Gary. I learned to code assembler language on that computer and in the year I was supposed to be revising for my exams, I was writing games instead. My parents were furious, but it worked out okay in the end, I suppose. I sold my first game with my school mate, John Pickford [half of the Pickford Bros].

Was gaming the only career you considered?
No, I considered joining the RAF but the Falklands War made me realise that the marketing for the Air Force was a bit biased towards fighting rather than travelling the world looking like Tom Cruise. I also made a reasonable amount of cash from games and my thoughts started to err towards games as a career. At the time they were considered as faddy as skateboards…

IN THE YEAR I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE REVISING FOR MY EXAMS, I WAS WRITING GAMES INSTEAD

So how did you get your job at the development studio Binary Design?
I think it was John's mum who saw the advert in the *Manchester Evening News*. We both went up for the interview and I went in first. I was offered the job straight away and John was a bit worried because he thought he wasn't going to get it. We were both working together the following week.

What did you work on while you were there?
Heaps of games, including *Deathwake*, *Max Headroom* and *Zub*. Later I became the manager of the place. John and Ste were kind

of the design brains of the business and they turned out some really imaginative titles like *Zub*, *Amaurote* and *Feud*.

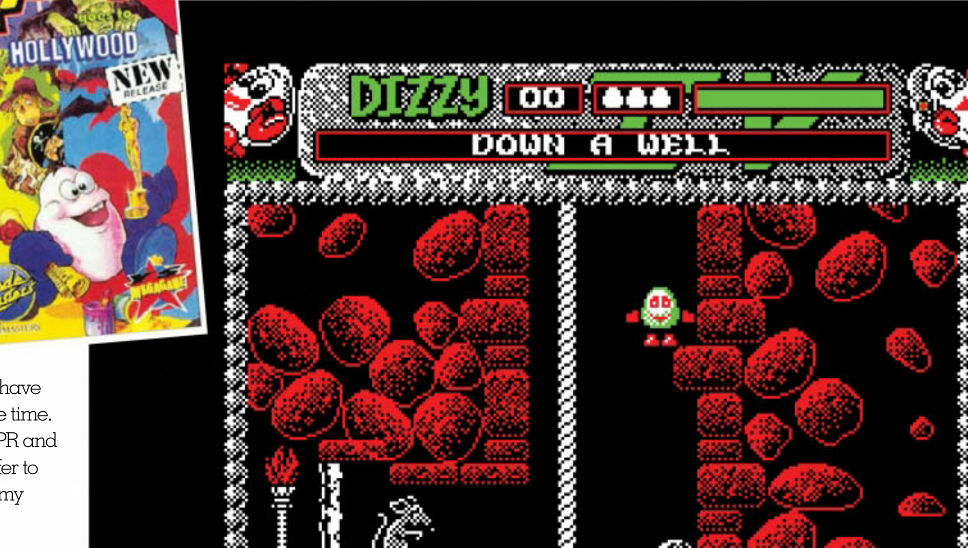
How different was management to programming?
Loads different! My attention had to shift to the money side. It quickly became evident I had a flair for it. To be honest I kind of treated the whole thing like it was a game. Which I think it is, really. You just have to keep all the plates spinning at the same time. I have never really been any good at the PR and marketing side of things though. I often refer to the fact that, as a Northern bloke, I spoke my mind more than I should have.

So why did you leave Binary Design?
Towards the end the magic kind of went. John and Ste left with a heap of people and I thought you know I can do this all myself so I set up Big Red which was ace, scary, fun, brilliant, then near calamity. I was sharing the studio of an independent TV company and it folded. It left me and a journalist called Judy with nowhere to go. She had some spare cash and let me sub-let her new office in Macclesfield. My fortunes changed very quickly after this.

What happened to turn everything around?
First I snagged the *Fun School* games and then stuff for Codemasters. I owe a lot to that helping hand Judy gave me. *Fun School* came about as I was dead cheeky. I realised that the publishers shared the same postcode as me so I wrote them a letter saying I could pop in and turn around any one of their games in about a week which we did again and again and again.

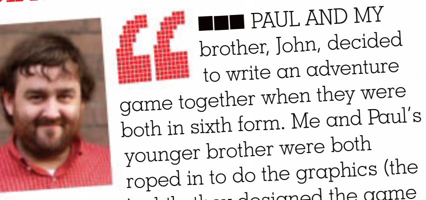
The company then became something of a family affair, didn't it?
Well, my brother Peter was working for Big Red by then and another chap called Fred Williams. We became a *Fun School* machine turning out games faster than their management could handle on occasion. It was a cinch because we were porting the games and they needed very little in the way of graphics and what we did need, our Peter could turn around in hours. Its much easier to port as you don't really need to spend to much time thinking about design. It gave my business a much-needed shot in the arm as frankly we would not have made it past summer without Europress.

Which machines did you enjoy working with?
I worked on Z80 based machines: the Amstrad CPC, Speccy and the Game Boy. I knew the language that drove these machines inside out and this meant that I could spend time on other aspects of my business.



In 1990, Big Red took over the *Dizzy* franchise on Codemasters' behalf and produced the huge *Magicland Dizzy*.

SIXTH FORM CODERS



" PAUL AND MY brother, John, decided to write an adventure game together when they were both in sixth form. Me and Paul's younger brother were both roped in to do the graphics (the junior position) while they designed the game and coded it. The game was set in ancient Babylon and they did a ton of research into Sumerian cuneiform script and stuff and had a brilliant design that involved a science facility sending someone back into the past to fix things. They basically invented *Assassin's Creed*. "

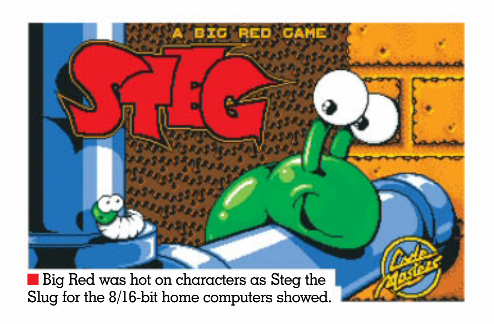
STE PICKFORD

Big Red then took on the *Dizzy* series. How did that come about?
Again, cheek. I wrote to Codies to say I could make them a best-selling game. I based it on a darts game called *180*, which I made with the guys at Binary Design but I filled it with comedy characters. It got called *Wacky Darts* which I didn't really like but it sold well enough and my relationship with Codies blossomed. I was invited to a load of parties and it was at one of these that Philip Oliver asked me if I could turn my attention to his *Dizzy* games. The Olivers were too busy making games for consoles at this point and to be given such a franchise was an absolute godsend. I owe Philip and Andrew a lot for that break.

And then you spun off with *Seymour*...
Seymour was, I think famously, the stand in for *Dizzy*. We originally designed the game he first appeared in to be for Dizzy but there was resistance to having him appear in a real world environment like Hollywood. Peter, my brother, was an amazing pixel animator so he quickly knocked up the sort of potato on legs that Seymour became. He was named by one of our other friends who just thought he looked like a Seymour. We alternated between *Dizzy* and *Seymour* so that we would not flood the market with either character.

You were also involved in Codemasters' cheat system, the Game Genie, weren't you?
I was the project manager for many of the devices from the Game Boy to the SNES and Mega Drive. I was involved in the design of the plastic moulding and some of the electronics, but the complex stuff was done by other people. My company Big Red found the cheat codes for all of the Game Boy titles and we made tools that made the searching of the cheat codes easier.

How was it working with Codemasters?
Brilliant! At the time it was like a big family. I liken the experience to those people who have had



Big Red was hot on characters as Steg the Slug for the 8/16-bit home computers showed.

great mates from university. We worked hard and played hard. There were incredible, life-defining parties, too many to mention.

Why did you part with Codemasters?
We ran out of runway, I think. The good times faded for me and I wanted challenges elsewhere. It was a really difficult choice. I tried to leave once before but David [Darling, Codemasters' co-founder] lured me back. It wasn't working though so I jumped back to working full time with Big Red. We continued for a while working with Codies but I got a big break when I met up with my old chum John Kavanagh. We had worked together at Binary when he was a project manager at Domark. I owe John one for my break too.

You started to switch to 3D games at that point, didn't you?
I did. I had been to Las Vegas that year and I was blown away by *Virtua Fighter*. Until this point I hadn't really been impressed with 3D (apart from Simon Bratell's *Tankbusters*). I thought I gotta have a bit of this. Phil Allsop was working at DiD making 3D stuff and I asked him if I could licence his 3D engine. This was a very innovative move for the time. Most games people considered part of their prowess was to own all the code that they made. By licensing, I think I broke a unwritten rule. It gave Big Red a turbo boost like no other and catapulted our status into the world of 3D gaming.

***Big Red Racing* was a huge game.**
Originally we were trying to pitch the idea of making *Micro Machines* in 3D to Codemasters. I had been project manager for this title and Big Red had made the Game Boy and PC versions of the game. Codemasters were intrigued but slow. I met John Kav and he was well up for it. That year, I also had Warner Bros and Gametek bidding as well. I felt really rock and roll. I went for the relationship with Domark based on my mates John and Dominic. Dom took me for dinner and gave me the insight for the business deal of my life.

So what eventually prompted you to sell the company to Eidos?
Dom explained how he was working with a team that was going to raise money from the stock exchange in both the UK and USA. Together we were going to have the cash to take over the world. For a while there we nearly did, but with great power comes great responsibility as Spider-Man's uncle once said. This was the Nineties and the dotcom boom, Blair's Britain and Britpop. I think that the party went a bit crazy for a while. Eventually I decided that it was a bit too crazy as it was taking me further away from the things I loved to do.

I REALLY WANTED A SPECTRUM BUT MY DAD THOUGHT I SHOULD HAVE A COMPUTER WITH A REAL KEYBOARD

What did you do after Big Red?
I set up Aqua Pacific, another games company, and focused on making sports titles: a heap of golf and tennis games. I did this for nearly 12 years and made a decent living at it. We had high moments with *Real World Golf*, and made serious, arcade, casino and budget games. The business was becoming very stressful for me, though. I had to make sure my salary bill of near £30,000 was made each month and it took its toll when companies you worked for went bust or refused to pay for some trivial design reason or another – you know who you are! I limped the business past Christmas so everyone could be paid but had to close it in January. Everyone was immediately hired because of my good friend Philip Oliver, who took the guys under his wing.



But you came back with Slam Productions. Were you glad to be back in games?
Yeah! I was back to coding, and with the removal of the stress of Aqua Pacific I set to work with a plan to make casual games. I snagged *Top Trumps* from Darren Melbourne, had a gig for *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* from Pete Dalton and through some speed networking events I managed to work with the team at Mindscape. In two years we managed to push out nearly 40 different games using our amazing Slam Tech.

How has the industry changed?
It's all extremely risky these days. You have to have to confidence to put out games that people want to pay for after they have tried them. Free-to-play seems to be very successful for some people. I've tried and I will try again.

What have you learned from everything?
I have grown through the rock 'n' roll years of the games business. My early attempts at management were all about simply being a nice but insistent person. These days it's more professional. Gone are the days when a bunch of mates could turn something out in a few weeks, although the free-to-play indie feels very similar. I am a proponent of Agile Methodology these days. In fact I have recently written a book about the subject for any budding entrepreneur in the games business. Its called *Agile Fu: Leadership Development For The Project Management Of Innovation Teams* and it is available on Amazon. I have followed this book up with a new title that I call *Innovation Muscle*, which details how you come up with interesting ideas in the first place.



Seymour was created because Codemasters wanted to keep Dizzy in a fantasy setting but the games in which the character starred were very similar.

GAME CHANGERS

SHENMUE

Released: 8 November, 2000 **Publisher:** Sega **Developer:** Sega AM2 **System:** Dreamcast



In the last quarter before *Shenmue* shipped, it still had over 10,000 'actions' to be made on its bugs. The QA team worked 24-hour days to get everything ready in time.

One of Sega's most influential games, Shenmue was a ground-breaking force in the open-world genre, and represented the height of Sega's creative prowess. Known for its spectacular budget and feats of engineering, Shenmue changed the gaming world. We examine just how it managed to do so…

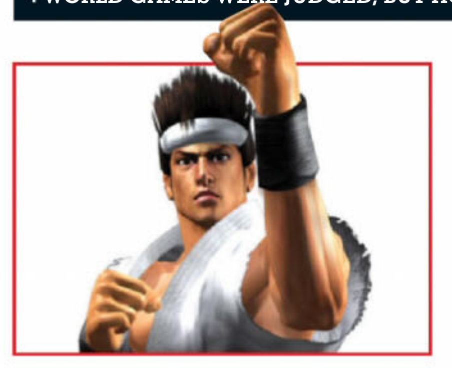
SHENMUE WAS ORIGINALLY planned to be an extension of Sega's esteemed *Virtua Fighter* series – an RPG addition to the fighting game's world on the Sega Saturn. The source code of *Shenmue* still reflects this – right from the way the game was built to the character models and scripts they run on (protagonist Ryo is still referred to as 'AKIR' in the code, for example, harking back to his original form of *Virtua Fighter*'s Akira).

As sales of the Sega Saturn began to wane in North America, it became clear to the Japanese branch of the publisher that something drastic needed to be done – the company had already sunk a considerable amount of budget into the title, as well as two years of development time, and it was quickly becoming evident that launching *Shenmue* on the Saturn wouldn't return the capital. *Shenmue*'s earliest form was re-worked, renamed 'Project Berkley' and adapted for the Dreamcast – which was still due to launch.

Under its new title, *Shenmue* managed to attract a team of 87 programmers – an insane undertaking for a game that would release in 1999. Lead systems programmer Tak Hirai has stated that simply debriefing with each programmer after a milestone was completed would take 14 and a half hours – and that was only if he took ten minutes with each staffer. As strenuous as this was it did have overall positive implications for Sega: Hirai was in charge of streamlining the programming language and pipeline for the Dreamcast, so everything he learnt from his team fed directly into the architecture

THE ANATOMY OF SHENMUE

SHENMUE MAY HAVE BECOME THE BENCHMARK TO WHICH ALL OPEN-WORLD GAMES WERE JUDGED, BUT HOW DID IT COME TO BE?



VIRTUA FIGHTER

★ The game's working title on the Sega Saturn was '*Virtua Fighter: Akira's Story*' – intended to be a game about the fighting game's hero.



NINETIES RPGS

★ In the research phase of the game, Suzuki played through practically all of the JRPGs from the Nineties, and was unimpressed by the scant interactivity he found there.



EIGHTIES ADVENTURES

★ After RPGs, Suzuki moved onto Eighties adventure games: he enjoyed world-building, but wanted to make something more player-focused.

of the Dreamcast. Long story short: without *Shenmue*, Sega's last console wouldn't have been the powerful, impressive beast that it was.

But Shenmue's influence extended far beyond simple hardware upgrades – the software showed off in-game is still impressive, some 16 years later. Hirai has noted that making everything feel completely natural – making the player truly feel 'at home' in *Shenmue*'s world – is a testament to how many 'invisible' features are going on behind the scenes. In-depth mechanics like the weather system, the day/night cycle and a massive 300 non-player character roster all had to work cohesively to make sure the game didn't crash or burn out the Dreamcast's processing potential.

As such, Hirai notes, all NPCs and weather effects were intentionally placed in certain areas so that the Dreamcast never had to render more than it was capable of at any one time. Think of it like a heat map – where if one section of the game was reading 'too hot', features were moved or altered so that the world would still work, but run at a less hungry rate. For a game released in 1999, these are amazing features. At the time, we'd never seen an open world like this before; for its day, *Shenmue* was the closest thing to a living, breathing virtual world a player could ask for.

SHENMUE WAS THE CLOSEST THING TO A LIVING, BREATHING VIRTUAL WORLD A PLAYER COULD ASK FOR

KEY FACTS

- Yu Suzuki's original plan for *Shenmue* was a game that lasted 45 hours, split into 'fighting', 'training', 'linking', 'moving', 'conversation' and 'dungeon' denominations.
- Suzuki has claimed that if his team hadn't compressed their initial vision, *Shenmue* would have been 'between 50 and 60 discs' in size!
- The design motto for *Shenmue* during development was simply: 'leisurely, fully, gently'.

It was partly to do with the scope and scale of the world but the little details were what really helped to solidify *Shenmue* as a deeply immersive experience. Like Ryo's shadow; it fell at a different angle depending on the time of day. And there were individually animated fish that swam around in a koi pond. Birds scattered and flew away as you approached them; there was a stray cat that you could look after; you could build a collection of capsule toys; you could spend all your hard-earned wages in a realistic videogame arcade if you wanted to. All of these small additions to the game required lines and lines of code, hundreds of textures or assets, and countless hours of work. And for what? A potential small reward, a missable cutscene, a small moment of extra immersion for the player.

■■■ *Shenmue* is remembered fondly for the way it coaxed players into a false sense of security in this new, exotic yet domestic world: it was a level of escapism and immersion that games until this point hadn't offered. It was a simulator, at its core, putting you in the shoes of a kid who not only wanted revenge for his dead father, but also wanted to be a better person, a stronger person. It's a coming of age story that isn't scared to show you the dirt under the fingernails of life in Eighties Japan, it's a game that pushed console hardware further than it had been pushed before. It was a game whose legacy is undeniable.

Without *Shenmue*, it's likely that we wouldn't have made such strides into the open world genre so quickly (and so adeptly), it's likely Sega would have died a miserable death long before it stopped producing hardware, and it's likely that a lot of gamers' tastes wouldn't have been shaped the way they have. *Shenmue* was a watershed moment, not just for Sega, but for the industry at large, too.



GAME CHANGERS

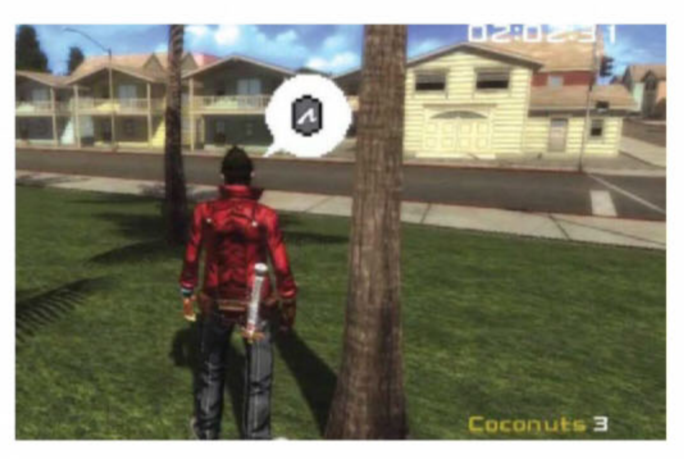
8 OTHER GAMES WITH UTTERLY MENIAL JOBS

ONE BIG ASPECT OF SHENMUE'S GAMEPLAY WAS INDULGING YOURSELF IN MENIAL JOBS. THIS SET OFF A TREND THAT'S BEEN KEPT ALIVE AND WELL UNTIL THIS VERY DAY. HERE ARE OUR EIGHT FAVOURITE POINTLESS TASKS IN GAMING



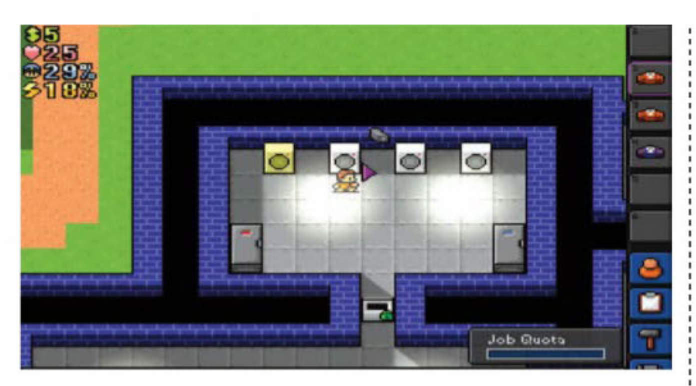
CHECKING PASSPORTS

THE ENTIRETY OF *Papers, Please* revolves around you – you lucky peasant! – after you've won a lottery and have the honour of protecting Arstozka's borders from would-be immigrants or terrorists. It perfectly deconstructs the way games, well, gamify things and makes you really care about your job: if you get it wrong, or do it *too* well, your family won't eat, you can't afford medicine or rent, and you *will* die. Lovely.



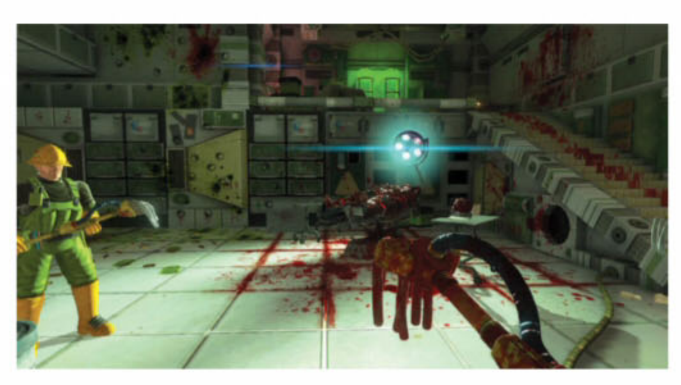
COLLECTING COCONUTS

IT'S HARD WORK, but someone's got to do it, right? Although, do they…? It's probably less strenuous than some of the other *No More Heroes* jobs – from minesweeping a beach to collecting cats, the game offered a bizarre slew of extra-curricular activities. What made it worse was doing these tasks with the Wiimote – it took quite a bit of effort to gather all the coconuts, and that slow waddle your hero did when holding the goods? Infuriating.



DOING A MURDERER'S LAUNDRY

■ WE'RE ASSUMING HERE that the laundry we're doing is that of murderers – after all, you get put in some pretty high-security prisons in *The Escapists*. Though you're supposed to be sat in this room, doing this job for about four in-game hours a day, you can actually nick one of the dirty guard uniforms to wear it after hours, which is something of a bonus.



CLEANING UP BLOOD

■ *VISCERA CLEANUP DETAIL* (yes, that's its actual name) is a game where the core conceit is that you are a *janitor*. That's it – no frills, lots of mess, you're required to turn disgusting, blood-soaked walls into their natural sparkly state. Drop debris, spill a used bucket or got blood on your shoes and you're just going to make things worse for yourself. And this is the whole game.



RUNNING A SHOP

■ THE MOST INFURIATING mini-game in the original *Digimon World* game doesn't run on logic, but on the whims of idiots that demand you sell them items at a loss, otherwise they'll tell everyone else not to bother coming. You're on top of a cliff, in the heat, the only food source for miles, and these monsters tell you to give it to them at half the cost price? The nerve.



TEACHING MATHS

■ IN *PERSONA 4*, you can power up your id (or ego, or superego – or whatever your Persona is supposed to represent) by heightening your social links: this can be achieved by romancing people, getting jobs or just being a good guy. Thing is, once you boost your confidence, you can be a bit more… aloof. Tutoring a snotty little kid might just push you over your limits…



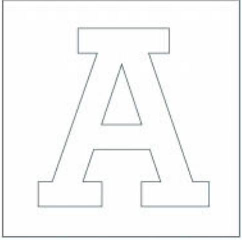
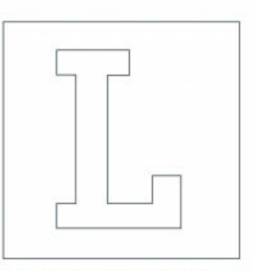
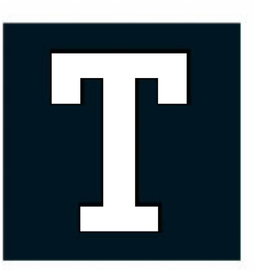
SHIPYARD CRATE-HAULING

■ THE MOST TENUOUS and stressful part of *Grand Theft Auto V* wasn't the torture scene, it wasn't the countless driving missions, or that one part of the game where you have to go scuba diving *forever*, no. It was the bit where you get a job hauling shipping containers around a dockyard for about eight hours at a time. You could say, at this point, the game went 'full *Shenmue*'.



DELIVERING PAPERS

■ THIS ONE'S PRETTY self-explanatory. The game lets you choose one of three routes (Easy Street, Middle Road and Hard Way) and then tasks you with delivering as many papers as possible to the inhabitants of the suburb. The kid in *Paperboy* manages to turn up for his *incredibly* long routes every day of the week, which seems a bit much to us, especially considering that he seems to live in an area where *no-one* has any regard for road safety.

THE 

RETRO DUO PORTABLE SNES/NES GAME SYSTEM



MANUFACTURER: **RDP GAME SYSTEM** PRICE: **£65**

BUTTON-MASHING IS a lot more enjoyable than prodding a screen, right? The SNES/NES portable is an interesting beast – we imagine it isn't officially licensed by Nintendo, but by the same token, it requires you owning the original game cartridges to play… therefore it doesn't intrude on piracy laws and such. The device is as simple as it looks – you just plug in the cart, and you can play to your heart's content (the box says it can last up to eight hours, but around five is much more realistic). Though the press shots show the game in use with a NTSC cart, the device *will* work with PAL games, too – just not all of them. Some PAL SNES games have issues running (notably *Super Metroid* and *Super Mario World* – the biggest draws of the device…), but all NES games work without pause. If you've still got an on 60Hz PAL compatible CRT monitor knocking around, you can even hook the portable up to that, using the console itself as a controller-by-proxy. For around £65 (it's listed as $99.99 on ThinkGeek), this really isn't a bad deal. If you're a retro enthusiast that travels a fair amount, or just want a more accessible way to play your old classics, this is the way to do it. Better yet, if you sat on the Sega side of the old console wars, any RetroGen adapters will work with the device, too, meaning you can *also* play any Sega Mega Drive games you still happen to own.

VERDICT 8/10



ABSTERGO INDUSTRIES BAG

If you prefer to show off your allegiance to geekdom in a subtle way, this official Abstergo bag might be for you: smart, compact and toting a reference only those that *know* games will understand, it's the perfect understated accessory.
www.gamer-heaven.com



PLAYSTATION-SHAPED MESSENGER BAG

On the not so subtle side, this official PlayStation messenger bag is A4-sized, so you can slot your tablets and such in there with ease. Perfect for any Nineties kid who grew up with Sony's infant hardware.
www.gamer-heaven.net



ABSTERGO INDUSTRIES WALLET

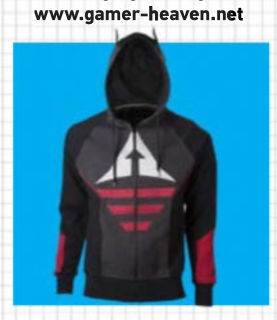
Complementing the messenger bag, this faux leather wallet is presented quite nicely (notice that synchronisation bar down the side?) and, again, is totally unassuming to anyone that doesn't know the *Assassin's* franchise.
www.gamer-heaven.com

GAMING CLOTHING



ARKHAM KNIGHT JACKET

The closest you're going to get to rocking Batman's *Arkham Knight* gear, this limited edition jacket also has a quilted, padded black interior to keep you warm on those long nights of vigilantism.
www.gamer-heaven.net



ARKHAM KNIGHT HOODIE

If you'd rather go a bit more casual, and down the villainous route to boot, this hoodie might be for you. The hood even has the Knight's antenna 'ears' on top (non-functioning, unfortunately).
www.gamer-heaven.net



ARKHAM KNIGHT BATMAN MASK

BuyCostumes has already managed to get a pretty good replica of Bats' *Arkham Knight* mask on the shelves, so if you wanted to complete some cosplay or keep your Bat-impressions up to date, they've got you covered.
www.BuyCostumes.com

FALLOUT 4 PIP-BOY EDITION



SOLD BY: **BETHESDA**
PRICE: **£99.99**

IF YOU WANT one of these amazing replica Pip-Boys, you'll have to be quick: at the time of writing, they're going in and out of stock at an alarming rate. The Limited Edition version of the game comes with a replica of the Pip-Boy – it even comes with a code that lets you download an app onto your smartphone and slot it into the Pip-Boy, making a *fully functional arm-worn device*. This edition comes with a display stand for the device when you're not wearing it on your wrist, a 'perk poster' that lets you keep a physical track of how you're powering up your wanderer and, better yet, it's all presented in a collectible case that looks like Power Armour. Be still our beating hearts.
store.bethsoft.com

FALLOUT POP! VINYLS

SOLD BY: **BETHESDA** PRICE: **£10**

THE POP! VINYL figures are gathering a cult following – no doubt because of how well they're made and capture the likenesses and essences of the characters they're commissioned for. In light of that, Bethesda has teamed up with Funko to release a Lone Wanderer (male) and Lone Wanderer (female) figure. But that's not all! They're also releasing a Brotherhood of Steel soldier, a Deathclaw, a ghoul, a Super Mutant and Vault Boy himself as figures.
store.bethsoft.com













TRANQUILITY LANE VAULT BOY WATCH

SOLD BY: **BETHESDA** PRICE: **£45**

BETTY SAYS WEARING this watch will make you 'popular, likeable and certainly *won't* make you want to cause anyone around you any undue stress or harm'. Betty's just an innocent little girl, right? So what reason should you have to not trust her? She also told us that the watch is gold-plated, that it runs on reliable Japanese quartz movement, is shipped with a genuine leather band and that it's water resistant up to 30 meters. Isn't Betty a good girl?
store.bethsoft.com










THE ART OF WORLD OF WARCRAFT (2015)


PUBLISHER: **EGMONT**

WHEN A BOOK OF art for something like *Warcraft* comes out, people take notice. The fact that can happen *at least* once a year is even more impressive. But when one of these books comes with a foreword by the game's art director (Chris Robinson) *and* one of the lead *Hearthstone/Warcraft* illustrators (Alex Horley)... you know you're onto something special.

The book contains artwork of everything you'd want to see in Azeroth in more detail – character art, item concepts, background illustrations... everything. Some of the more impressive pieces of art have a double-page spread dedicated to them, and some are laid out in a more bespoke way. Over 224 pages, the book takes you on a tour of Azeroth to some degree: all five *Warcraft* expansions are included in the volume, so you get to see what subtle changes have gone into the backend of the game over the last decade (and more). Accompanying the majority of the images is a commentary by Blizzard art-directors (past and present) and each of them is a byte of insight into what went into making one of the most popular games of all time.

The book has been designed really well – not only are the images presented nicely, but it *scans* wonderfully, too. The design team behind this clearly saw the book as a passion project. Pair that with the high-quality hardback binding and the photo-grade paper it's all printed on, and you've got one of the highest quality art books **games™** has reviewed yet.

www.egmont.com

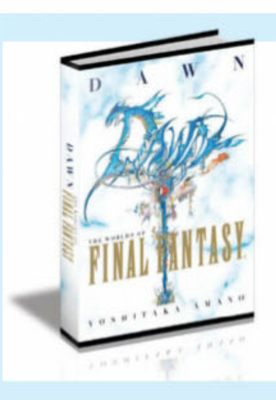
VERDICT 10/10



THE ART OF DESTINY

Bungie's concept art has always blurred the line between fantasy and sci-fi, and looking back through the annals of *Destiny*'s creative process is the ultimate realisation of this. Absolutely spellbinding.

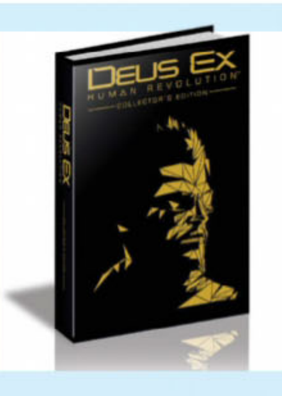
www.wordery.com



DAWN: THE WORLDS OF FINAL FANTASY

With *Final Fantasy XV* coming up – which is taking cues from some older *FF* games, it seems – it makes sense to bone up on some of the fantastic flora and fauna of the series, right? Right.

www.darkhorse.com



DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION COLLECTOR'S EDITION

This book doubles as an in-game guide and art book – because if you're going to go for 100 per cent completion, you may as well do it whilst admiring the scenery.

www.future-press.com



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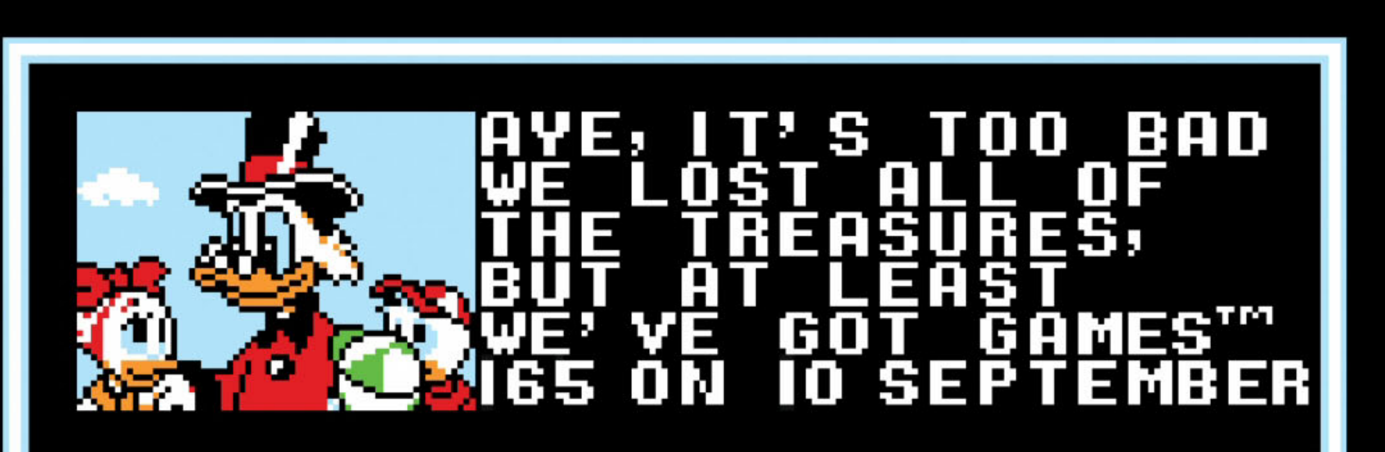
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